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### Njáls saga and its Christian background

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## Chapter 3

### Justice and Mercy

#### 3.1 Introductory

The present chapter will argue that the author of *Njáls saga* saw in the arrival of Christianity in Iceland the answer to the dangers to society that were discussed in chapter 2 above: witchcraft and thievish pride (vengefulness), with their effects on personal relationships of friendship and marriage, and on a vulnerable system of justice based solely on equity, with its ‘careful scorekeeping’, and ‘alternating rhythm of giving and taking, inflicting and being afflicted’<sup>306</sup>, a system which can so easily be manipulated into escalating feuding. The first of these dangers needs little discussion: the chapters that recount the Christian mission to Iceland include a confrontation with a witch, Galdra-Heðinn (Heðinn the Sorcerer), who is destroyed by the missionaries (pp. 259-60)<sup>307</sup>; after this, and following the conversion of Iceland, witchcraft disappears from the narrative. The second threat to society, vengefulness, can apparently be neutralised by love, if the case of Hallgerðr’s second marriage can be taken as an example.

The Christian faith is based on the power of divine love, which works to support the law: of central importance within Christianity is the belief that Christ came, as he himself said, not to destroy the law, but to fulfil it<sup>308</sup>. The relationship of Christianity to their own national law was completely familiar to Icelanders of the thirteenth century, from sources<sup>309</sup> which recounted how their pagan ancestors had converted to the new faith at a meeting of the Alþingi where a pagan chieftain, Þorgeirr Ljósvetningagoði, declared on behalf of the whole community that Christianity should immediately be adopted as the official faith in Iceland. In his account of this historic moment, the author of *Njáls saga* used the same wording as begins *kristinna laga þáttur* (‘the section on Christian laws’), the introductory section to the lawcode *Grágás*<sup>310</sup>:

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<sup>306</sup> Miller, *Bloodtaking and Peacemaking*, p. 182.

<sup>307</sup> See further 5.4 below.

<sup>308</sup> Matt. v, 17.

<sup>309</sup> Notably, Ari’s *Íslendingabók*, ch. 7. Lönnroth notes that ‘the conversion of Iceland was, after all, considered to be one of the most important events in the history of the country’, and suggests that ‘stories about the major Allthing meeting and about Þorgeirr’s speech were probably told over and over again during the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, constantly circulated by the priests and carefully remembered by the faithful’ (*A Critical Introduction*, p. 220).

<sup>310</sup> ÍF 12, p. 272, n. 3.

“Þat er upphaf laga várra,” sagði hann, “at menn skulu allir vera kristnir hér á landi ok trúa á einn guð, fœður ok son ok anda helgan”. (p. 272)

(‘The first principle of our laws,’ he declared, ‘is that all men in this land shall be Christian and believe in one God, Father, Son, and Holy Ghost’.)

The people of Iceland, from this moment, have a new basis on which to enact the law: reconciliation, working through love on the divine model<sup>311</sup>. It will be argued in this and subsequent chapters that this radical shift in ethics offers no easy answer, however: firstly, the old ethic of revenge continues to find adherents; and secondly, the Christian ideal of mercy is not to be achieved at the expense of justice, which will always demand due punishment of the guilty, while mercy itself requires penitence before it can act. The principal heroine of *Laxdæla saga*, Guðrún Ósvífrsdóttir, is towards the end of her life the recipient of God’s grace: in chapter 1 above, it was argued that the symbolism associated with the parts of a church might be used to demonstrate Guðrún’s reconciliation to Christ (her access to the altar being freed by the removal of the witch’s bones). But that reconciliation could only be achieved after a good deal of penitential suffering for her past sins.

It was also argued in chapter 1 above that the reading of the latter part of *Laxdæla saga* is enriched when an examination is made of the liturgy appointed for the two dates from the ecclesiastical year that are referred to in the narrative (Thursday before Easter, Thursday after Easter). In the present chapter it will be argued that in *Njáls saga* too, the liturgical readings associated with a date in the church calendar (in this case, Michaelmas) supply information necessary for a fuller reading of the saga. A further suggestion made in chapter 1 was that the author of *Laxdæla saga* intends the reader to make a comparison of events at the pagan start and the Christian ending of the saga (the stories of Unnr in *djúpúðga* and Guðrún Ósvífrsdóttir); it will now be suggested that in *Njáls saga* too, a comparison is intended between events at the pagan start and the Christian ending of the narrative. This structural linkage is certainly reminiscent of the one seen in *Laxdæla saga*, although in the case of *Njáls saga*, the comparison is not between two of the saga’s important characters, but rather between how justice is enacted at the start of the narrative, under the rule of a pagan king of Norway, and at the end, under a Christian

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<sup>311</sup> According to Scripture, ‘love is the fulfilling of the law’ (Rom. xiii, 10).

king of Ireland. The latter passes judgements in which justice is tempered with mercy; the former, it will here be argued, rules with justice alone.

### 3.2 Haraldr Greycloak and Brian Boru.

Hrútr Herjólfsson's meeting with Haraldr Greycloak, king of a Norway that is still heathen, produces the saga's first statement of a ruler's obligation to enforce the law. Hrútr states his case:

“ek á erfðamál mikit hér í landi, ok mun ek yðvar verða við at njóta, at ek fá rétt af.” Konungr segir: “Hverjum manni hefi ek heitit lögum hér í landi.” (p. 14)

(‘I have a large inheritance to claim in this country, and I shall have need of your support if I am to secure my rights.’ ‘I have promised all men the protection of law in this realm,’ said the king.)

As noted at 2.3 above, the king's reply articulates the principle of impartial justice, in accordance with the central medieval concept of equity: “*Hverjum manni hefi ek heitit lögum hér í landi*” (‘I have promised law for everyone in this land’). But though the king's words sound properly regal, the reality of Haraldr's rule is that power lies not with him, but with his mother, Queen Gunnhildr. It is she, and not the king, who recovers Hrútr's inheritance from Sóti:

Qgmundr sagði Gunnhildi frá ætlan Sóta; hon bað Guðrøð taka hann af lífi. Guðrøð fór þegar ok kom á óvart Sóta ok lét leiða hann á land upp ok festa þar upp, en tók féit ok færði móður sinni ... Gunnhildr segir Hrúti, at hon hafði tekit erfðina, en látit drepa Sóta; hann þakkaði henni ok gaf henni allt hálf við sik. (p. 19)

(Qgmundr told Gunnhildr about Sóti's plans. She asked [her son] Guðrøð to kill him. Guðrøð set off at once, came upon Sóti unawares, had him taken ashore and hanged there. He seized the money and brought it to his mother ... Gunnhildr told Hrútr that she had recovered his inheritance and had had Sóti put to death. He thanked her, and gave her half of it.

During the Middle Ages, it was felt that justice, including capital punishment, ought to be administered impersonally by the king, who for this purpose:

bears a sword, wherewith he sheds blood blamelessly, without becoming thereby a man of blood, and frequently puts men to death without incurring the name or guilt of homicide<sup>312</sup>.

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<sup>312</sup> *Policraticus* IV, ch. 2 (Dickinson, p. 8).

The medieval ideal was of an impartial justice, administered by the king as God's agent, but this ideal is threatened when any other power becomes involved. And Gunnhildr, as was discussed in sections 2.3 and in particular 2.6 above, is very definitely personally involved in Hrútr's case.

Gunnhildr is merciless in protecting her secrecy because her power depends on it. She warns her servants (p. 15): "*Þér skuluð engu fyrir týna nema lífinu, ef þér segið nokkurum frá um hagi vára Hrúts*" ('you will lose nothing apart from your lives, if you say anything about affairs between Hrútr and me'). And when Úlfr óþveginns does hintingly allude to the liaison, while fighting at Hrútr's side in a sea-battle against an outlaw named Atli, he is immediately doomed:

Hrútr hjó til Ásólf, ok varð þat banahogg. Þetta sá Úlfr óþveginns ok mælti: "Bæði er nú, Hrútr, at þú hoggst stórt, enda átt þú mikit at launa Gunnhildi." "Þess varir mik," segir Hrútr, "at þú mælir feigum munni." Nú sér Atli beran vápnastað á Úlfi ok skaut spjóti í gegnum hann. (p. 18)

(Hrútr struck at Ásólf, and it was his death-blow. Úlfr óþveginns saw this and said, 'That was a heavy blow, Hrútr; you have much to repay Gunnhildr for.' Hrútr says, 'I have a presentiment that you are speaking with a doomed mouth.' At that very moment Atli noticed a gap in Úlfr's defence, and hurled a spear right through him.)

This is the first battle in *Njáls saga*; the last is the battle of Clontarf. The Irish king Brian Boru fell in this battle, although his forces gained the victory. The author of *Njála* seems to have wished to reinvent the character of this king, since his portrayal in the saga differs from that in the known sources<sup>313</sup>. The King Brian of *Njáls saga* establishes his rule on the principle that justice should be tempered with mercy, and the narrative context leaves the reader in no doubt that he does indeed enjoy the love of God.

Characteristic of Brian Boru's system is his merciful weighting of the scales of judgement:

Brjánn konungr gaf upp útlögum sínum þrysvar ina somu sök; en ef þeir misgerðu optar, þá lét hann døma þá at lögum, ok má af því líku marka, hvílíkr konungr hann var. (p. 442)

(King Brian would always forgive men he had sentenced to outlawry, even when they committed the same offence thrice; but if they transgressed yet again, he let the law take its course.)

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<sup>313</sup> ÍF 12, p. 442, n. 2.

This combination of mercy and justice is presented in the saga as an ideal, and it accords with medieval thought. Merely to be *either* merciful *or* just is not enough; rather, it is the combination of punishment and pardon that is virtuous:

virtue, as a middle, stands between two extremes, which are vices. The extremes ... of justice [are] vindictiveness and excessive leniency<sup>314</sup>.

The idea can be traced back ultimately to Scripture, and commentaries on it. The Beatitudes, the first section of the Sermon on the Mount, were interpreted as providing the first statement of the Christian's obligation to use justice and mercy together:

*Blessed are they that hunger and thirst after justice ...* Gloss: Justice and mercy are so joined together, that the one must ever be tempered by the other: for justice without mercy is cruelty, mercy without justice is weakness. Hence, following justice, He says of mercy: *Blessed are the merciful*<sup>315</sup>.

John of Salisbury says that the ruler must strive to achieve this combination:

[the prince] must ceaselessly meditate wisdom, that by its aid he may do justice, without the law of mercy being ever absent from his tongue; and so temper mercy with the strictness of justice that his tongue speaks nought save judgement<sup>316</sup>.

In the character of Brian Boru, who succeeds in combining justice and mercy to effect true judgement, the author of *Njáls saga* provides a portrait of the ideal ruler. John of Salisbury points out that the exercise of judgement by such a ruler is impelled both by the love of God and by 'the love of his brethren'<sup>317</sup>. This portrait in *Njáls saga* of a ruler who judges by mercy and justice, though based on a conventional medieval view of kingship, and ultimately on Scripture, is as far as I know unique within the *Íslendingasögur*.

The ideal ruler embodies the values according to which a Christian society should live: love of God and neighbour. Brian Boru's merciful justice is proof of his love of his neighbour; his love of God is revealed at the battle of Clontarf (ch. 157), where he refuses to take part in the fighting because it is Good Friday. Although a non-combatant, he is killed in the battle and his head is struck off. He dies with double glory, however: his forces defeat their foes, and he receives his eternal reward from God, clear evidence

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<sup>314</sup> William Granger Ryan, trans., *The Golden Legend*, vol. I, p. 322 (*Saints Vitus and Modestus*).

<sup>315</sup> *Catena Aurea*, trans. *Sunday Sermons* IV, p. 466. The Scriptural verses are at Matt. v, 6-7.

<sup>316</sup> *Policraticus* IV, ch. 8 (Dickinson, p. 40).

<sup>317</sup> *Policraticus* IV, ch. 8 (Dickinson, p. 37).

of this being furnished by the fact that his head grows back to the body - a miracle not recorded in other accounts of the battle<sup>318</sup>.

### 3.3 The battle of Clontarf

The battle of Clontarf, then a field outside Dublin, was fought on Good Friday 1014 (23rd April) between forces led by the Irish high king Brian Boru (Brjánn in *Njáls saga*) and a confederacy that included Sigurðr Hloðvisson, Earl of Orkney, and King Sigtryggr Ólafsson of Dublin<sup>319</sup>. As noted above, Brian Boru fell in this battle, although his forces gained the victory. The saga makes no mention of the fact that they had suffered so many losses, that after the battle, ‘they could do no more than march home. The Viking stronghold of Dublin, whose capture had been their goal, was untouched by them.’<sup>320</sup>

A traditional view of the Clontarf episode in *Njála* saw it as a structurally damaging interpolation within the saga<sup>321</sup>. For Clover<sup>322</sup>, this and the Conversion episodes both mark ‘genuine digressions’ within the narrative. With respect to the battle of Clontarf, Cook<sup>323</sup> has summarised this problem of relevance as follows:

Its relevance to the story of *Njáls saga* is slight, apart from the fact that Earl Sigurðr of Orkney died on the heathen side, along with fifteen of the burners.

Lönnroth<sup>324</sup> takes the opposite view, drawing attention to two parallels between the saga’s portrayal of King Brian and of Njáll. He notes, first, that both Brian and Njáll are ‘ideal judges, mild and forgiving’: Brian pardons outlaws three times for the same crime, while Njáll is described, ‘right before the burning’, as having three times saved ‘one of the prospective burners’, Ingjaldr of Keldur, from outlawry. Lönnroth further points out that both Brian and Njáll have a foster-son whom they each love more than their own sons; in addition, both of these foster sons (King Brian’s foster-son is Kerþjálfaðr, Njáll’s is Hqskuldr Hvítanessgoði) are the ‘sons of former enemies’.

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<sup>318</sup> ÍF 12, p. 453, n. 4.

<sup>319</sup> Hudson, ‘Brjáns saga’, p. 241.

<sup>320</sup> Hudson, ‘Brjáns saga’, p. 242.

<sup>321</sup> Einar Ólafur Sveinsson, *Á Njálsbúð*, pp. 37-38.

<sup>322</sup> *The Medieval Saga*, p. 28.

<sup>323</sup> *Njal’s Saga*, p. 352.

<sup>324</sup> *A Critical Introduction*, pp. 232-33.

There are two further parallels between Njáll and Brian to be noted, important since they link the battle of Clontarf with the *él*<sup>325</sup> at Bergþórshváll<sup>326</sup>. The second, chronologically, is that the bodies of both Brian and Njáll receive signs after death of God's grace: Brian is killed by decapitation, but his head grows back to the trunk, and Njáll's body has a particular radiance. The other parallel between them is that neither of them is a belligerent<sup>327</sup>. The historical Brian had been a warrior-king, but was very old (eighty-eight or eighty-nine years) at the time of the battle of Clontarf, which probably explains his not taking an active part<sup>328</sup>. According to the 'War of the Irish with the Foreigners'<sup>329</sup>, however, 'when Brian is attacked by the viking Bróðir the king is still able to wield his sword'<sup>330</sup>. Brian's age is not mentioned in *Njála*, but in the saga account, he is determined that he will not wield weapons: *hann vildi eigi berjask föstudaginn* ('he would not fight on the fasting day').

The author of *Njáls saga* makes of the battle of Clontarf a struggle between the forces of good and evil, with the enemies of Brian, the ideal ruler, depicted as anti-Christian. For example, Earl Sigurðr Hlqðvisson's raven-banner, the making of which is described in *Orkneyinga saga*<sup>331</sup>, is neutrally referred to in the account of Clontarf given in *Þorsteins saga Síðu-Hallssonar*: *Þorsteinn mælti: "Ber sjálfr krák þinn, jarl"* (Þorsteinn said, 'Carry your raven yourself, Earl.'). In *Njáls saga*, however, the banner is differently described, and the identity of the speaker is changed (p. 451): *Hrafn svaraði: "Ber þú sjálfr fjanda þinn"* (Hrafn replied, 'Carry your devil yourself') - it is worth noting here that the name of the speaker, Hrafn, means 'raven'. In *Njáls saga*, too, the battle of Clontarf ends with the rout of Brian's enemies, although Albertus Goedheer<sup>332</sup> comments that, from a historical point of view, 'the facts ... are ... unfavourable to the idea of a victory of Christianity over paganism'. In fact, 'the Norse settlers in Ireland were Christians in this period'.

<sup>325</sup> The term is used by Njáll (p. 328) to describe the burning. Its core meaning is 'snow shower', but it also has the metaphorical meaning of 'battle' (Cleasby-Vigfusson). See also ÍF 12, p. 328, n. 4.

<sup>326</sup> Haki Antonsson, 'Some Observations on Martyrdom', p. 71 n. 2, has also seen these parallels, but is open-minded as to whether they exist 'by design or not'.

<sup>327</sup> An Irish tradition had it also that Brian was killed while at prayer. See Hudson, 'Brjáns saga', p. 242.

<sup>328</sup> See Goedheer, *Irish and Norse Traditions*, pp. 22 and 30.

<sup>329</sup> 'compiled, in its present form, late in the eleventh or early in the twelfth century' (Hudson, 'Brjáns Saga', p. 255).

<sup>330</sup> Haki Antonsson, 'Some Observations on Martyrdom', p. 70.

<sup>331</sup> Composed ca. 1190, probably in Iceland. It seems likely that 'the author of *Njáls saga* used a version of *Orkneyinga saga* not merely for information about the Battle of Clontarf, but also more widely for Britain and Ireland' (Hudson, 'Brjáns Saga', p. 254).

<sup>332</sup> *Irish and Norse Traditions*, p. 108.



In *Njáls saga*, the account of the battle is focused around the stories of three men: Hrafn the Red, who has just been mentioned, and ‘two vikings’ (*víkingar tveir*), named Óspakr and Bróðir. There may or may not be a historical antecedent for the first of these (Goedheer<sup>333</sup> somewhat doubtfully suggests a certain Ascadal), but in any case, the name in *Njáls saga* is invented, and apparently generic (it means ‘Unwise’, and is ironic, since Óspakr is described as *allra manna vitrastr*, ‘the wisest of men’).

It looks as though the author of *Njáls saga* also gave a generic name to the second of the two named Vikings at Clontarf, Bróðir, ‘which is not a Norse proper name at all’<sup>334</sup>. This man is certainly based on a historical figure. The *Annals of Ulster* names him among a list of those who fell in the battle: *Brotor (qui occidit Brian)* (‘Brotor, who killed Brian’), and describes him as ‘chieftain of the Norse fleet’<sup>335</sup>, while the *Annals of Loch Cé*, written after 1220, refer to him as Brodar, a jarl from York<sup>336</sup>. Only in *Njáls saga*, where he is an apostate, is his character developed beyond these brief details (p. 446):

Bróðir hafði verit kristinn maðr ok messudjárn at vígslu, en hann hafði kastat trú sinni ok górk guðníðingr ok blótaði heiðnar vættir ok var allra manna fjölkunnigastr.

(Bróðir had been a Christian and an ordained deacon, but he had cast aside the faith and become a betrayer of God, and sacrificed to heathen spirits and was very skilled in sorcery.)

It would seem that the name the author inherited from his sources provided him with the opportunity to give another of his creations a generic name, its meaning, ‘Brother’, being an ironic reference to his previous existence as a deacon.

The saga’s spiritual polarising of the two sides makes of Clontarf a battle of extreme historical significance, heralded by supernatural events: on one night, boiling blood falls as rain on the forces of Óspakr and Bróðir; on the next, they are attacked by their own weapons, which fight by themselves; and on the third, ravens with beaks and claws of iron fly at them. The wise Óspakr interprets these (p. 447) as apocalyptic phenomena, signs of ‘the breaking-up of the world’, so that ‘you [i.e., the vikings] will all die soon’ (*heimsbrestr: munuð þér deyja allir brátt*). The saga’s account of the

<sup>333</sup> *Irish and Norse Traditions*, p. 100. Ascadal is named in ‘The War of the Irish with the Foreigners’, but his name corresponds to a Norse \*Áskell or \*Ásketill.

<sup>334</sup> Hudson, ‘Brjáns Saga’, p. 253.

<sup>335</sup> *Irish and Norse Traditions*, p. 20.

<sup>336</sup> *Irish and Norse Traditions*, pp. 23-24. The statement that Brodar comes from York cannot be trusted as being historically accurate: *ibid.*, p. 26.

battle of Clontarf therefore treats it as a time of judgement, when those who are anti-Christian will be doomed.

Óspakr has already declared he will not fight against so good a king as Brian. Now, having interpreted the signs, he switches sides and is converted. Bróðir, however, persists in his apostacy, takes a leading part in the battle, and kills King Brian. He is captured shortly thereafter, and, as Hill<sup>337</sup> has shown, suffers the fate appropriate for an apostate: he is killed by having his bowels cut out, a motif taken from the familiar stories of Judas and Arius. (Hill points out that: ‘the death of Arius, perhaps the most prominent heresiarch, is frequently mentioned or alluded to in medieval Latin and vernacular religious literature’<sup>338</sup>).

As noted above, it is a mark of King Brian’s qualities as an ideal ruler that he exercises legal judgements according to the principle of justice and mercy working together: ‘he pardoned outlaws three times for the same crime, but if they did it again he let them be dealt with according to law.’ Hrafn the Red, who has already undergone two penitential pilgrimages to Rome, therefore has possibly one last chance when he fights for the enemies of Brian Boru. Towards the end of the battle, as he and his side are defeated and put to flight, he is pursued into a river (p. 452), where he looks down and ‘seems to see into hell, with devils attempting to drag him down to them’: *þóttisk þar sjá helvíti í niðri, ok þótti honum djöflar vilja draga sik til.*

In his extreme spiritual danger, Hrafn prays: ‘Your dog, Apostle Peter, has twice run to Rome and will run a third time, if you save him’. If Brian Boru is indeed an example of the Christian ideal ruler, then presumably the model which he follows, divine judgement, works according to the same principle of cooperating mercy and justice as he himself does. In this case, therefore, Hrafn has already had two out of three chances when he has his vision of hell. His prayer is answered, and he is given his third and last chance.

The devils that Hrafn sees have appeared in the saga once before. On the third night of supernatural horrors before the battle, ravens attack the vikings, *ok sýndisk þeim ór járnri nefin ok klærnar* (‘and it seemed that their beaks and claws were of iron’). Óspakr, ‘the wisest of men’, explains to Bróðir what this wonder means:

Óspakr mælti þá: “... En þar er hrafnar sóttu at yðr, þat eru óvinir þeir, er þér hafið trúat á ok yðr munu draga til helvítis kvala.”

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<sup>337</sup> ‘The Evisceration of Bróðir’.

<sup>338</sup> ‘The Evisceration of Bróðir’, p. 442.

(Then Óspakr spoke: ‘... When ravens attacked you, it meant that the fiends in whom you believed will drag you down to the torments of hell.’)

The fiends in whom Bróðir believes are the *heiðnar vættir* (‘heathen spirits’) to which he sacrifices. In the old faith of the vikings, to which Bróðir has reverted, the ravens that symbolise these spirits were closely associated with Óðinn, and with battles. Unlike Bróðir, however, Hrafn, although he carries the name of ‘Raven’, will have nothing to do with paganism and its symbols. When Earl Sigurðr Hlqðvisson of Orkney asks him to carry the famous raven banner, he replies: “*Ber þú sjálf fjanda þinn*” (‘Carry your devil yourself’). His name, like the names Óspakr and Bróðir, is generic and ironic.

In this way, *Njáls saga* presents the stories of these three fighters at Clontarf as a triple paradigm: Óspakr, the heathen whose wisdom enables him to recognise the power of the true God, and who comes over to Brian’s side and converts; Bróðir, whose career goes in the opposite direction: having started as a Christian, he is an apostate and the implacable enemy, and killer of, King Brian; Hrafn, Christian and weak, starts the battle among Brian’s enemies, but by the end has become a penitent. Bróðir is justly doomed, but Óspakr and Hrafn are both shown mercy. Indeed, it is Óspakr who makes the decisive breakthrough in the battle (pp. 451-52):

Óspakr hafði gengit of allan fylkingarminn ... Sigtryggr konungur flýði fyrir honum. Brast þá flótti í qllu liðinu.

(Óspakr had fought his way through the whole flank of the army ... King Sigtryggr fled before him. Then his whole force broke into flight.)  
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In the saga’s first, naval battle, Úlfr ópveginn is killed when he draws Hrútr’s attention to the debt he owes Queen Gunnhildr, hinting thereby that he knows of their relationship. He dies immediately, and unjustly. Gunnhildr had warned her followers: “*Þér skuluð engu fyrir týna nema lífinu, ef þér segið nokkurum frá um hagi vára Hrúts*” (‘You have nothing to lose but your lives if you tell anyone about the relationship between me and Hrútr’), but Úlfr hasn’t actually spoken ‘about the nature’ (*um hagi*) of the relationship, so technically he has not disobeyed her command.

As well as the raven, the other beast associated with Óðinn and battles is the wolf. In the two battles under discussion, two men meet fates they scarcely deserve, if

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<sup>339</sup> Einar Ólafur Sveinsson, recognising the historical improbability of this, rationalises: ‘King Sigtryggr fled before him (i.e., Kerþálfaðr)’: *A Literary Masterpiece*, p. 185.

the rules of simple justice are to apply. In the first, an unwashed wolf dies for a trivial offence, because where the demonic has the power there can be no mercy, and even the slightest debt demands the ultimate payment. At Clontarf, the opposite applies: a baptised raven, whom justice alone would consign to hell for his crimes, appeals to God for mercy, and lives. The message, therefore, of the episode of the battle of Clontarf is that wherever there is faith and penitence, there is hope of salvation.

As these two battles reveal, in the Norway of Haraldr gráfeldr, where the controlling supernatural power is malevolent, the result is merciless injustice. Where the power of God is present, mercy is extended to all but those who refuse to heed the warnings given them, and continue to fight against good. It will be argued at 3.8 and 3.9 below that another battle in *Njáls saga* shows justice and mercy working together, and that the author took from the liturgy his model for the behaviour of the characters who empower that cooperation. This battle was fought at the Alþingi following the burning of Njáll and his family.

### **3.4 The conversion of Síðu-Hallr**

The modern reader who is familiar with medieval literature in other vernaculars may well come to *Njáls saga* with the expectation of seeing the story of Iceland's first convert to Christianity treated as a spiritually and / or historically significant *exemplum*. Such a reader might expect that of all the episodes in the saga, this one at the very least will be thoroughly Christian in tone. Yet critics of the saga have suggested that Hallr's conversion makes reference to ideas that are only partially Christian. One problem has been that the content of the discussion between Hallr and Þangbrandr has seemed to them in places to undermine, rather than support, any Christian message there may be in the episode.

A case in point concerns whether the narrative admits of the distinctly unchristian possibility of bargaining with God. Maxwell, who claims that: 'Hallr is in a sense the leading representative of the Christian spirit', nevertheless believes that Hallr 'cannily stipulates that the archangel Michael shall have a special care' of him<sup>340</sup>. And if Hallr's terms for agreeing to be converted seem 'canny' to the modern reader, his desire to have the archangel as a 'friend' may seem to betray the complete naïveté of a pagan who understands nothing of angels' nature as spirits. It is possible that the author is

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<sup>340</sup> 'Pattern', p. 43.

indulging in a little gentle humour at Hallr's expense, although this seems *a priori* unlikely in an account of the moment when the first Icelander is converted. It is more likely that no humour is intended, and that the theological naïveté concerning St Michael is the author's own.

Lönnroth has suggested that the description of the role of the archangel, as Hallr's promised *fylgjuengill* shows syncretism by the author of pagan and Christian beliefs:

Such a creature is otherwise unknown in saga literature. The author of *Njála* evidently made him up by combining the traditional Norse Fetch motif with the Christian idea of guardian angels. In this case, he probably sought inspiration from an older Christian legend about the fetches of Síðu-Hallr's family. He appears to have integrated the native belief in fetches into a theological framework. ... it is possible to translate *fylgjuengill* simply as 'guardian angel' if *fylgja* is interpreted as synonymous with *fylgð*, 'following', but the fetch motif is so prominent in *Njála* and the author so explicitly refers to the legend about Síðu-Hallr's fetches (chapter 96) that 'fetch angel' seems to be the best translation<sup>341</sup>.

The meaning of this word will be discussed below, as will the issues of Hallr's 'bargaining' with God, and his request to have the archangel Michael as a 'friend'. But these are all aspects of a wider question concerning the degree of originality with which the author portrays Síðu-Hallr in this scene.

### 3.5 *Njáls saga* and other accounts of the Conversion of Iceland

In the terse wording of Ari's *Íslendingabók*, Þangbrandr's mission to Iceland is described as follows (chapter 7):

Hann [viz Óláfr Tryggvason] sendi hingat til lands prest þann er hét Þangbrandr, ok hér kendi monnum Kristni, ok skírði þá alla er við trú tóku. En Hallr á Síðu Þorsteinsson lét skírask snimhendis, ok Hjalti Skeggjason ór Þjórsárdali, ok Gizurr inn Hvíti Teitsson, Ketilbjarnarson frá Mosfelli, ok margir hofðingjar aðrir.

(He sent here to this country a priest who was called Þangbrandr, who gave people instruction in Christianity, and baptised all those accepted the faith. But Hallr Þorsteinsson of Síða had himself baptised early, as did Hjalti Skeggjason from Þjórsárdalr, and Gizurr the White, the son of Teitr, the son of Ketilbjörn from Mosfellr, and many other chieftains.)

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<sup>341</sup> A *Critical Introduction*, p. 133 and n. 44.

*Íslendingabók* here names a number of chieftains who were quickly converted by Pangbrandr, and it may well be that the historical missionary sought to convert the chieftains first. Strömbäck has pointed out that the sources stress ‘over and over again’ that ‘in his missionary work Óláfr Tryggvason turned his attention above all to chieftains and other influential men’<sup>342</sup>. And to concentrate the missionary effort on the chieftains was in any case probably the best strategy to adopt in Iceland.

Strömbäck goes on to suggest, with reference to the above passage from *Íslendingabók*: ‘the conversion of such a commonwealth as Iceland, with its social emphasis on aristocratic descent and cult-leadership’, would naturally enough privilege ‘the attitude of the chieftains’<sup>343</sup>. Furthermore, Ari was of aristocratic descent himself, and was in fact descended from Síðu-Hallr: Hallr’s son, Þorsteinn, was the father of Gyðríðr, the mother of Jóreiðr, the mother of Ari<sup>344</sup>. It might therefore be expected that Ari’s account of the conversion would seek to emphasise the role played by the chieftains in general, and by Síðu-Hallr in particular. Yet Ari simply provides a list of converted chieftains, in which Síðu-Hallr’s is merely the first name.

Síðu-Hallr is given far more importance in the account of the conversion of Iceland that is found in *Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar in mesta*. According to this version, and the closely similar *Kristni saga*, Hallr is first attracted to Christianity at Michaelmas (29th September), and is baptised the following Easter Saturday. The beginning of this version, as recounted in *Flateyjarbók*, is as follows:

Pat uar vm haustit hinn næsta dag firir Michaelis messu þa letu þeir Pangbrandr nónhæilagt. Hallr bonde var þar ok spurde hui þeir letu af at vinna. Pangbrandr suarar. þenna dag er eftir ferr holldum (uer) heilagt ok hatidliga til dyrdar hinum hæilaga Michaeli hofudæingli guds. Hallr mællti. huerr uar Michael sa firir ser edr huersu er hann j hatt. Pangbrandr suarar. Michael uar æigi madr helldr ande skapadr af gude almatkum ok skipadr hofdinge annarra æingla þeirra er hann hefir til setta at strida j moti dioflinum ok hans fiandligum eyrendrekum ok at hlijfa ollu kristnu folki retttruadu uid skamsyniligum skeytum vhreins anda. Michaeli hofudæingli er ok æinkanliga af gude gefit ualld yfir kristinna manna salum framfarande af þessum heimi at taka vid þeim ok læida þær j halæita huilld.

(It happened in the autumn on the day before St Michael’s Mass, when Pangbrandr and his companions were celebrating the feast. The land-owner, Hallr was there, and asked why they had put aside their work. Pangbrandr answers: ‘The day which is about to come we hold as a holy

<sup>342</sup> *Conversion*, p. 34.

<sup>343</sup> *Conversion*, p. 36.

<sup>344</sup> ÍF 1, p. 318.

high-feast in honour of Michael, God's archangel.' Hallr said: 'Who was Michael, or what qualities did he have?' Pangbrandr answers: 'Michael was not a man, but a spirit, created by Almighty God, and set up as chief over the other angels, whom God had appointed to fight against the devil and his evil followers, and to protect all right-believing Christians against the blind fury of the unclean spirit. In particular, the Archangel Michael was given by God power over the souls of Christian people, when they leave this world, to receive them and lead them to their great rest.'<sup>345</sup>

In its recognition of the historical importance of Síðu-Hallr's conversion this account is much closer to that found in *Njáls saga*<sup>346</sup>. There are, however, certain differences of detail, each small in itself, which, when taken together, can be shown to provide a significantly different reading both of Hallr himself, and of the spiritual process which leads to conversion. The major changes to the story for which the author of *Njála* would appear to be responsible are the following: the date of Hallr's conversion, and the eschatological role of the archangel, portraying him as weigher of people's deeds, rather than as psychopomp and leader of the heavenly army.

It is not impossible that *Njáls saga* preserves the historically correct date for Hallr's baptism (Michaelmas), as Óláfr Tryggvason's missionary work was done in haste<sup>347</sup>, so that the historical Pangbrandr's most pressing need was presumably to gain influential converts as quickly as he could. But the arguments against this being the historical date are stronger: firstly, no other medieval source agrees with *Njála* concerning the date; secondly, it is surprising that a chieftain should accept the faith so quickly from an unknown missionary who had so recently arrived.

The historical evidence suggests furthermore that King Óláfr Tryggvason did not expect the Icelandic chieftains to rush to accept Christianity, and that he put them under a good deal of pressure to be converted. He could threaten them politically and economically, as he had it in his power to put a stop to all voyages between Iceland and Norway, at a time when 'the Icelanders were heavily dependent on trade with Norway'<sup>348</sup>. And personally and emotionally, they were already in the king's power, since he had taken as hostages the sons of four of Iceland's noblest chieftains, one from each quarter. These four were, in all likelihood, the 'chieftains most strongly opposed to

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<sup>345</sup> *Flat.* I, p. 422. For the very similar *Kristni saga* version, see *Hauksbók*, p. 133.

<sup>346</sup> Maxwell writes of *Njáls saga*: 'what strikes one is that the narrative has been shaped to give special prominence to one man, Síðu-Hallr' ('Pattern', p. 37).

<sup>347</sup> Strömbäck, *The Conversion of Iceland*, p. 34.

<sup>348</sup> Jón Jóhannesson, *Íslendinga saga*, p. 138.

Christianity’<sup>349</sup>. *Njáls saga*, however, has nothing to say concerning these matters: in the saga, Síðu-Hallr is under no pressure to be converted.

A further argument against the historicity of the saga’s date of Michaelmas for Síðu-Hallr’s conversion rests on the fact that, until the twelfth century, Canon Law continued to prescribe the vigils of Easter and Pentecost for the holding of baptisms<sup>350</sup>, and these dates were privileged in the Icelandic ‘Christian Law’ (*kristinna laga pátttr*), as found in the lawcode *Grágás*. It therefore seems likely that the accounts given in *Flateyjarbók* and *Kristni saga* preserve the historically accurate date of Hallr’s baptism, in naming Easter Saturday. If this is so, then the most probable explanation of the change of date in *Njáls saga* is that the author wished to portray Hallr as being so urgently desirous of baptism as not to have been willing to wait. Of course, it may be that the author’s sources were inadequate on this point, or that he simply misremembered information he had been given. But other details of his account appear to support the view that he in fact deliberately brought forward the date of Hallr’s baptism, in order to suggest that for Hallr, the spiritual development that leads to conversion was extremely rapid.

According to the versions given in *Flateyjarbók* and *Kristni saga*, Þangbrandr first landed in Iceland at a spot close to the home of Hallr, who was away at the time on a journey to Fljótsdalr. Local reaction to the mission was initially hostile, and far from winning converts, Þangbrandr was refused hospitality. *Kristni saga* reads:

En er menn visso at Þangbrandr var Cristenn ok hans menn, þá vildu þeir ecke við þá mæla lannz-mennener, ok eige vísa þeim til hafnar<sup>351</sup>.

(But when it was discovered that Þangbrandr and his men were Christians, the locals would not speak with them, nor would they show them to a harbour.)

Upon Hallr’s returning home, Þangbrandr presents him with a message from King Óláfr Tryggvason, requesting him to afford hospitality to the missionary, which he does.

At this point in the narrative, the accounts in *Flateyjarbók* and *Kristni saga* vary in one significant detail. According to the somewhat tersely worded account in *Kristni saga*, Hallr, on receiving King Óláfr’s message, merely arranges for the removal of Þangbrandr’s goods, the stowing of his ship, and hospitality for himself and his men. In

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<sup>349</sup> Jón Jóhannesson, *Íslendinga saga*, p. 132. Kjartan Ólafsson was among those hostages.

<sup>350</sup> See Fisher, *Christian Initiation*, pp. 109-110.

<sup>351</sup> *Hauksbók*, p. 386. In addition to these details, the account given in *Flateyjarbók* states that the *bygdarmenn* would give them neither *mann-dom* nor *hialp* (*Flat.* I, p. 421).



the *Flateyjarbók* version, however, Hallr receives Þangbrandr and his message graciously and benevolently (*uel ok godgiarnnliga*).

Both *Kristni saga* and *Flateyjarbók* show Hallr as hesitating before agreeing to be baptised. In *Kristni saga* he first confers with the members of his household:

Hallr spurðe hiún sín, hversu þeim þockaðez athæfe Cristinna manna; en þau léto vel yfer. Hallr var skírðr Laugardagenn fyrir Pasca, oc hiún hans qll þar í áinne.

(Hallr asked the members of his household what they thought of the customs of the Christians, and they said they thought them good. Hallr was baptised on Easter Saturday in the river there, together with his whole household.)

In *Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar* Hallr demands, as a condition of his acceptance of Christianity, evidence of the miraculous power of the Christians' God:

Þangbrandr talade tru fyrir Halli ok eggjade hann at snuazst til sidlætis kristinna manna. ok æinn tima mælti Hallr til Þangbrandz. suo er hattat at her med mer eru kellingar gamlar hrumar ok qruasa sua at þær liggia j kqr ok mega æigi sealfar bera sig. nu mun ek þig lata skira kellingarnnar. en ef þær mega nokkut hræra sig eftir skirnina edr þær se þa nokkuru sottminne en adr edr þeim þynge ekki vid er þær erv sua hrærdar at þær se j uatnn færðar þa se ek at mikill kraftr fylgir kristnum sid. skal ek þa lata skirazst ok allt mitt heimafolk.<sup>352</sup>

(Þangbrandr spoke to Hallr about faith, and urged him to turn himself to the good behaviour of Christians. And on one occasion Hallr said to Þangbrandr: 'It so happens that there are elderly women here with me, so feeble and infirm that they lie bedridden and are not able to support themselves. I will now have you baptise the old women. And if they are able to stir somewhat after the baptism, or if they are then rather less sick than before, or if their condition does not deteriorate when they are moved and brought into the water, then I will see that great power accompanies the Christian faith. I shall then have myself and all my household baptised.')

The corresponding account in *Njáls saga* reads as follows:

Þetta it sama haust kom skip út austr í Fjorðum í Berufirði, þar sem heitir Gautavík; hét Þangbrandr stýrimaðr ...

Brœðr tveir bjoggu á Berunesi; hét annarr Þorleifr, en annarr Ketill ... Þeir logðu til fund ok þonnuðu mǫnnum at eiga kaup við þá.

Þetta spurði Hallr af Síðu; hann bjó at Þvátta í Álptafirði. Hann reið til skips við þrjá tigi manna; hann ferr þegar á fund Þangbrands ok mælti til hans: "Ganga ekki mjök kaupin við menn?" Hann sagði, at svá var. "Nú vil ek segja þér mitt ørendi," segir Hallr, "at ek vil bjóða yðr qllum heim til mín ok hætta á, hvárt ek geta kaup fyrir yðr." Þangbrandr þakkaði honum ok fór þangat. (pp. 255-57)

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<sup>352</sup> *Flat.* I, p. 423.

(That same autumn a ship put in to land in the Eastfjords at Berufjörður, at a place called Gautavík. The captain was called Þangbrandr...

At Berunes lived two brothers, called Þorleifr and Ketill...They summoned a district meeting and forbade anyone to trade with the newcomers.

Síðu-Hallr, who lived at Þvátta in Álptafjörður, learnt about this. He rode to the ship with thirty men and went at once to meet Þangbrandr.

‘Is the trading going badly?’ asked Hallr.

Þangbrandr said that it was.

‘I shall tell you why I came here,’ said Hallr. ‘I want to invite you all to stay at my house, and I shall take the responsibility for marketing your goods.’

Þangbrandr thanked him, and went to Þvátta.)

There is no hesitation here. As soon as Hallr hears about the arrival of the missionaries, he goes to meet Þangbrandr (*ferr þegar á fund Þangbrands*). This reverses what happens in the other two versions, in which the missionary ‘went to find him’ (*fór Þangbrandr at finna hann: Kristni saga*); or ‘came to meet with him’ (*kom Þangbrandr til motz við hann: Flateyjarbók*). In *Njáls saga*, Síðu-Hallr is the active one of the two, hurrying to meet the Christians, and offering hospitality voluntarily, rather than in response to a request from the king. And again later, when Hallr has heard the missionary’s words about St Michael, he does not need either to seek the advice of his household or to wait for a miracle; instead, he immediately embraces the new faith.

It is just possible that the details of Hallr’s actively welcoming the missionaries, and of his immediate conversion, were copied from some lost source, although it seems most likely that they were all made by the author of *Njáls saga*, since they consistently develop Hallr’s character as that of a man who is actively eager for conversion. But regardless of whether or not these details are original to *Njála*, or were copied from some lost *\*Kristni þátt*, they are hardly consonant with any intention on the author’s part to portray Hallr as a ‘canny’ pagan, determined to stipulate the terms on which he was willing to be converted.

The author of *Njáls saga* seems to have been intent, then, on developing Hallr’s character in order to increase his importance within the saga’s account of the Conversion. And a comparison of *Njála* with the other sources reveals that St Michael, too, is made more important. For example, there is a good deal of material concerning angels in the *Flateyjarbók* account of Þangbrandr’s conversion of Síðu-Hallr, much of it

derived from the standard source: Gregory's thirty-fourth Gospel homily<sup>353</sup>. Nevertheless, the emphasis in *Flateyjarbók* is upon Christ, reflecting the probably Christocentric nature of the evangelising of Norway and Iceland during the conversion period<sup>354</sup>. The importance placed on the role of St Michael in *Njáls saga* is apparently unique and, it will be argued, almost certainly deliberate.

Support for this suggestion comes from another of the differences between the account of the Conversion in *Njáls saga*, and those in other sources, namely the way in which the saga portrays the archangel in his role as the weigher of people's deeds (p. 257):

hann skal meta allt þat, sem þú gerir, bæði gott ok illt, ok er svá miskunnsamr, at hann metr allt þat meira, sem vel er gort.

(he shall weigh all that you do, both good and evil, and he is so merciful that he gives more weight to all that is well done.)

Michael's scales are a familiar eschatological motif<sup>355</sup> that was certainly known in medieval Scandinavia<sup>356</sup>. The Orcadian poet, Arnórr jarlaskáld (after 1011 - after 1073) articulates the orthodox belief, in depicting the archangel's weighing of deeds as the first act in the process of judgement, to be followed by Christ's separation of the saved from the damned<sup>357</sup>:

Míkjáll vegr þats misgort þykkir,  
manvitsfróðr, ok allt et góða;  
tyggi skiptir síðan seggjum  
solar hjalms á dæmistóli.

(Michael weighs what seems wrongly done, ripe with wisdom, and all that is good; then the sovereign of the sun's helmet separates out men at his judgement-seat.)

Einar Ólafur Sveinsson<sup>358</sup> sees similarity of ideas between Arnórr's verses about Michael and the words of the missionary Þangbrandr, while Diana Edwards sees 'close resemblances'<sup>359</sup>. In fact, however, the saga's approach to the subject-matter is different

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<sup>353</sup> *hom. xxxiv in Evang.* (PL 76, cols. 1246-59).

<sup>354</sup> See Strömbäck, *The Conversion of Iceland*, p.55: 'The early scaldic poetry, our safest source for the mentality of the Conversion period, contains other references and kennings which suggest that Christ was the central figure in the missionary preaching and the convert's response'.

<sup>355</sup> For the historical development of the idea in the western tradition, see Kretzenbacher, *Die Seelenwaage*, especially pp. 62-64, 70-126.

<sup>356</sup> Sven Jansson, 'Runinskrifter', col. 489.

<sup>357</sup> Verses and translation are taken from Edwards, 'Christian and pagan references', p. 40.

<sup>358</sup> ÍF 12, p. 257.

<sup>359</sup> Edwards, 'Christian and pagan references', p. 40.

from that in the poem: Arnórr's archangel exercises only justice, disinterestedly weighing both good and evil, whereas Þangbrandr's archangel not only mediates justice with mercy, but privileges the latter.

For a thirteenth-century audience, the equal weighing of good and evil, as described in Arnórr's verses, would have reflected orthodox theology. Canon 1 of the Fourth Lateran Council (1215) had set out the standard position:

*Homo vero diaboli suggestionem peccavit ... Recipiant secundum opera sua, sive bona fuerint sive mala, illi cum diabolo poenam perpetuam, et isti cum Christo gloriam sempiternam.*

(The human race sinned in yielding to the Devil's temptation ... All shall receive according to their works, whether they have been good or bad: the latter [will receive] eternal torment with the Devil, and the former eternal glory with Christ)<sup>360</sup>.

The author's decision to depict St Michael as loading the scales of judgement in favour of mercy therefore marked a radical departure from orthodox belief.

### 3.6 Hallr's demands

In *Njáls saga*, Síðu-Hallr wants two things. First, he 'would like to have him [St Michael] as a friend' (*Eiga vilda ek hann mér at vin*), a request which may seem to the modern reader to be theologically naïve. In fact, the belief that the angels are men's 'friends' was orthodox during the medieval period:

Now, with regard to the angels, we have, it is true, no manner of fear that *such friends* may bring us sorrow, either by their death or by their degradation<sup>361</sup>.

Augustine's description of the angels as 'friends' in such an influential work as *Concerning the City of God* may well have helped to popularise the belief during the Middle Ages. But the key source for the belief is Gregory's seventh homily, for Christmas, on Luc. ii, 1-14<sup>362</sup>. Gregory's forty homilies on selected Gospel passages were universally influential in the Middle Ages, and if the author of *Njála* was a cleric he would certainly have known them. The seventh homily, together with the Gospel reading

<sup>360</sup> Russell, *Lucifer*, p. 189 and n. 65.

<sup>361</sup> *nullo modo quidem metuimus, ne tales amici uel morte nos sua uel deprauatione contristent*: Augustine, *De civ. dei*, Book 19, chapter 9. English translation from Bettenson, *St Augustine, Concerning the City of God*, pp. 863-64.

<sup>362</sup> Numbered *Homilia VIII* in Migne, *XL homiliarum in Evangelia libri duo*, PL 76, cols. 1075 - 1312.

from Luc. ii, 1-14, formed the seventh lection of the office of Mattins for Christmas Day. The Gospel lesson concludes with the song of the heavenly host: ‘Glory to God in the highest, and peace to persons of goodwill’. Gregory comments:

In truth, before our Redeemer was born in a human body, we were at variance (*discordiam habuimus*) with the angels. Because of our daily transgressions we were far from their brightness and cleanness owing to our first sin. Since our sinning made us strangers to God, the angels, God’s citizens (*cives Dei*), cut us off as strangers from their company. But because we acknowledged our king, the angels acknowledged us again as fellow citizens of theirs (*cives suos*). Since the king of heaven took upon himself the weakness of our human body, the company of angels on high no longer despises us. The angels return to bring us peace, they put aside the reason for their earlier hostility (*prioris discordiæ*); they now honour as their companions (*socios*) those whom they had despised as weak and despicable<sup>363</sup>.

The recovery of man’s friendship with the angels is made possible when Christ’s fleshly appearance in this world begins the process of reconciling mankind to God. It is therefore appropriate, and in accordance with orthodox belief, that the moment in *Njáls saga* when Christ’s faith appears in Iceland should also mark the beginning of that nation’s eligibility to be entered as ‘fellow citizens’ of the angels. The seal of friendship between St Michael, first among the heavenly host, and Hallr, according to *Njáls saga* Iceland’s first convert<sup>364</sup>, may be seen, then, as symbolic of the new bond of love that is henceforth to exist between Iceland and Heaven.

That Hallr should want the friendship of the archangel at once reveals the earnestness of his desire to become a Christian, and the grace of God in allowing him the vision necessary to contemplate such a friendship. For without divine grace, the fact that it is possible to have the angels as friends is now obscured by the deceit of demons<sup>365</sup>. Pangbrandr offers Hallr the vision of a God of mercy, and Hallr’s clear-sighted spiritual response is characteristic of the true Christian. Far from being a ‘canny stipulation’ that he will be converted only on his own terms, his desire to have the archangel as his friend

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<sup>363</sup> Transl. Dom David Hurst, *Forty Gospel Homilies*, p. 52; PL 76, col. 1104: *Prius quippe quam Redemptor noster nasceretur per carnem, discordiam cum angelis habuimus, a quorum claritate atque munditia per primæ culpæ meritum, per quotidiana delicta longe distabamus. Quia enim peccando extranei eramus a Deo, extraneos nos a suo consortio deputabant angeli cives Dei. Sed quia nos cognovimus Regem nostrum, recognoverunt nos angeli cives suos. Quia enim cæli Rex terram nostræ carnis assumpsit, infirmitatem nostram illa jam angelica celsitudo non despicit. Ad pacem nostram angeli redeunt, intentionem prioris discordiæ postponunt; et quos prius infirmos abjectosque despexerant, jam socios venerantur.*

<sup>364</sup> Historically there were Christians in Iceland before Pangbrandr’s mission (Strömbäck, *Conversion*, pp. 35-36), but *Njáls saga* says nothing of these.

<sup>365</sup> Augustine, *loc. cit.* The chapter heading begins: *De amicitia sanctorum angelorum, quæ homini in hoc mundo non potest esse manifesta propter fallaciam daemonum...*

is prompted by his sincerity, and should be contrasted with the deluded vision of those who believe themselves to be Christian, but who are nevertheless deceived by the devil into anti-Christian acts:

Satan, as Scripture tells us, transforms himself at times to masquerade as an angel of light... Hence, God's great mercy is needed to prevent anyone from supposing that he is enjoying the friendship of good angels when in fact it is evil demons that he has as his false friends.<sup>366</sup>

In choosing St Michael as a friend, Hallr is the beneficiary of 'God's great mercy'. And in these words of Augustine, perhaps, lie both the key to Hallr's character, and a clue as to why the revenge ethic does not simply disappear after the Conversion. Hallr has the humility necessary to benefit from divine grace; on the other hand, there may be others in *Njáls saga* who, while they sincerely profess Christianity, are in fact spiritually deluded, and act in ways that run directly counter to God's law of mercy, the law epitomised by the author in the figure of St Michael and his scales.

Hallr's other demand is for Þangbrandr's promise that the archangel will become his guardian angel:

"Þat vil ek þá til skilja," segir Hallr, "at þú heitir því fyrir hann, at hann sé þá fylgjuengill minn." "Því mun ek heita," segir Þangbrandr. Tók Hallr þá skírni ok öll hjú hans. (p. 257)

(Hallr said, 'I want to stipulate that you pledge your word on his behalf that he shall become my *fylgjuengill*.' 'I give you my promise,' said Þangbrandr. After that, Hallr and all his household were baptized.)

The word *fylgjuengill* is a *hapax legomenon*, and proposals as to what it means can therefore only be made by examining its literary context. As noted at 3.4 above, Lönnroth has suggested that *fylgjuengill* reflects syncretism of pagan and Christian views concerning attendant or guardian spirits (pagan *fylgjur*); his claim that 'fetch angel seems to be the best translation', involves accepting that the author 'appears to have integrated the native belief in fetches into a theological framework'<sup>367</sup>. McCreesh's suggestion that the archangel in some sense continues the protective role of the pagan *fylgja*, also implicitly claims that the word contains a blending of pagan and Christian belief:

When Síðu-Hallr embraces the faith in *Njála* he wants an assurance that he can have the Archangel Michael as his *fylgjuengill*. This suggests that

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<sup>366</sup> *Satanas, sicut legimus, transfiguratur se uelut angelum lucis ... magna Dei misericordia necessaria est, ne quisquam, cum bonos angelos amicos se habere putat, habeat malos daemones fictos amicos...* Augustine, *loc. cit.*

<sup>367</sup> *A Critical Introduction*, p. 133 and n. 4.

he believed he had forfeited the protection of his own *fylgja* by becoming a Christian.<sup>368</sup>

These comments of Lönnroth and McCreesh ignore the role which orthodox belief claimed was played by the archangel at the time of a nation's conversion. Michael is the guardian appointed by God at this key moment in the history of a people, when they become part of the new Israel; the large number of early church-foundations that are dedicated to the Archangel is testimony to the belief that he protects a newly-converted people from the assaults of the devil<sup>369</sup>. Furthermore, since he is 'integral to God's government of history'<sup>370</sup>, he is exactly the agent through whom God may be expected to intervene, when the promise of salvation is to be offered to a people.

### 3.7 Michaelmas

The claim, that the word *fylgjuengill* reflects syncretism of paganism and Christianity, fails also to take into account the significance of the day on which the author was determined to have Hallr converted, the feast *In Dedicatione S. Michaelis Archangeli*. But it is precisely the ecclesiastical significance of this date which leads to the conclusion that *fylgjuengill* refers to the purely Christian concept of the guardian angel (to be more narrowly defined below), for it is particularly with St Michael and his feast that the cult of guardian angels is associated.

It is immediately after hearing Pangbrandr celebrate Mass on the feast of St Michael that Hallr has himself baptised. The Gospel reading for Michaelmas, Matthew xviii, 1-10<sup>371</sup>, ends with Christ's words to his disciples:

Never despise one of these little ones; I tell you, their angels in heaven look continually on the face of my heavenly Father<sup>372</sup>.

Discussing this verse, in what was to become the best-known commentary on St Matthew's Gospel in the Middle Ages, Jerome writes: 'Great is the dignity of souls, that each one should have from its birth an angel appointed to guard it!'<sup>373</sup> The 'birth' of the

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<sup>368</sup> 'Contrasting Christian and Pagan Motifs' p. 771.

<sup>369</sup> Michael is the 'angel protector of Israel', and the 'tutelary angel of the Church (the new Israel)'. See Fallon, 'Michael, Archangel', pp. 793-94.

<sup>370</sup> Fallon, 'Michael, Archangel', p. 793.

<sup>371</sup> See, for example, *The Sarum Missal*, pp.328-29. This was also the Gospel reading for the feast *Sancti Michaelis in monte tumba* (October 16th): *ibid.*, p. 336.

<sup>372</sup> *Videte ne contemnatis unum ex his pusillis: dico enim vobis, quia angeli eorum in caelis semper vident faciem Patris mei, qui in caelis est.*

<sup>373</sup> *Magna dignitas animarum, ut unaquæque habeat ab ortu nativitatis, in custodiam sui, Angelum delegatum.* Jerome's comment was presumably widely known, as it was quoted in *Lectio* xii for

soul occurs at baptism, when it receives its guardian angel; this traditional belief was rehearsed in homilies for the feast of St Michael, as is evidenced in a Norse homily:

Varðhallz-engell es sendr hveriom manne til fulltings þa es hann es skírðr.<sup>374</sup>

(A guardian angel is sent to help each man when he is baptised).

As noted at 3.6 above, orthodox belief stated that Christ's incarnation and sacrifice had restored mankind's earlier friendship with the angels, and that baptism provided the opportunity for each individual to become a fellow citizen of Heaven with them. The role of the guardian angel was to protect and guide the baptised individual: from the moment that a Christian soul received a guardian angel, the angel accompanied that soul:

En af því vitraðusc forðum synilega varðhalz-englar hægum fæðrum ok spamonnum. at vér scylim því trva at os fylgia oc varðhalzenglar sliet hit sama sem þeim ef vér vilium eptir þeim dómum lifa.<sup>375</sup>

(But guardian angels formerly appeared to holy fathers and prophets so that we should believe that guardian angels accompany (*fylgia*) us also, in just the same way, if we wish to live after those examples.)

When Hallr stipulates that St Michael be his *fylgjuengill* from the moment of his baptism, he is making a theologically orthodox demand for a guardian angel, a companion to 'accompany' (*fylgia*) him on his spiritual journey through life and towards Heaven. This is indeed the role of guardian angels, who are sent by God *ut custodiant te in omnibus viis tuis* ('that they might guard you in all your ways'<sup>376</sup>). It would appear that the author of *Njáls saga* deliberately avoided using *varðhaldsengill*, the term which directly translates *angelus custos*, and invented the word *fylgjuengill*, in order to foreground the guardian angel's role as companion (cf. Gregory's *socius*) both during the lifetime, and immediately after the death, of the Christian to whose care the angel is assigned<sup>377</sup>. The episode of Hallr's conversion should be seen as being firmly based on Christian theology, with no hint of paganism present.

### 3.8 Hallr's humility

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Michaelmas.

<sup>374</sup> *Admonitio ualde necessaria. In die sancti Michaelis, GNH, p.142.*

<sup>375</sup> *Admonitio ualde necessaria. In die sancti Michaelis: GNH, p.143.*

<sup>376</sup> The Scriptural origin of the belief in guardian angels is Ps. xc, 11-12: *Quoniam angelis suis mandavit de te, ut custodiant te in omnibus viis tuis. In manibus portabunt te, ne forte offendas ad lapidem pedem tuum.*

<sup>377</sup> See also the discussion of the death of Skarpheðinn at 6.9 below.



According to *Njáls saga* (p. 408) Síðu-Hallr's son Ljótr was killed in the battle at the Alþingi that followed the burning of Njáll and his household. The saga's account would appear to be based on historical fact: Ljótr's killing was recorded for the year 1011 in two Icelandic annals of the late thirteenth century, *Resensannál* and *Hinrik Høyer's annal*, while the mid-fourteenth-century manuscript of *Skálholtsannál* gives as its record for that year: *1011: Bardagi á alþingi. Víg Ljóts Síðu-Hallssonar* (1011: Battle at the Alþingi. Killing of Ljótr, son of Síðu-Hallr). These are the oldest of the Icelandic annals, and they record nothing else for the year 1011, a fact which leads Jón Hnefill Aðalsteinsson to conclude:

The killing of Ljótr Síðu-Hallsson must be a historical fact and to my opinion it must also be a historical fact that for the sake of reconciliation Síðu-Hallr renounced his claim to compensation for his son and pledged faith and peace for his opponents. It is precisely this response of Síðu-Hallr which brought it about that the killing of Ljótr became so memorable an event that in the oldest annals it appears as the only specific incident recorded from the battle at the General Assembly.<sup>378</sup>

Medieval Icelanders might well have considered Síðu-Hallr's reconciliatory speech to be memorable, as Jón Hnefill Aðalsteinsson suggests, and most modern critics of *Njáls saga* believe it is important, although they have differed in their explanations of its significance. For Allen<sup>379</sup>, Hallr's words are of central importance, offering 'the nation a new wisdom', and constituting 'the act that shifts the saga itself onto an upward path that leads, eventually, to the reconciliation between Kári and Flosi and to Kári's marriage with Hildigunnr'. Magerøy<sup>380</sup> goes further, and considers that Hallr's words, which 'bring about reconciliation after the great battle on the Althing', make him 'the greatest of all peace promoters in the sagas of Icelanders'.

Lönnroth has disagreed, downgrading the importance of Hallr's speech to that of being the example chosen by the author to portray the generalised behavioural patterns of 'pious Christians' of the past, 'sometimes even abstaining from seeking legal compensation when higher interests were at stake'.<sup>381</sup> For Lönnroth, what is special about Hallr's speech is the guiding presence behind the words of the archangel Michael:

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<sup>378</sup> *Under the Cloak*, p. 94.

<sup>379</sup> *Fire and Iron*, p. 176.

<sup>380</sup> 'The Christ-Baldr Motive', p. 704.

<sup>381</sup> *A Critical Introduction*, p. 147. He continues: 'This abstention is exemplified by Síðu-Hallr's speech after the battle'.

the audience is probably to understand that Hallr acted so nobly because he was guided by his *fylgju engill*, Saint Michael, the great guardian of legal justice in medieval tradition<sup>382</sup>.

On the other hand, Andersson rejects any suggestion that the speech shows Christian influence, claiming that:

Hallr makes the gesture not out of humility but out of a sense of emergency and a recognition that his action must be drastic enough to meet the crisis. There is no reversal of values and no specifically Christian intrusion.<sup>383</sup>

It will here be argued that Hallr does indeed act in the spirit of Christian humility, and that his words demonstrate the values he had learnt at his Michaelmas conversion.

The speech in which Hallr waives his right to compensation is not his first at that assembly, although critics have ignored these earlier words of his:

Annan dag eptir gengu menn til lögbergs. Hallr af Síðu stóð upp ok kvaddi sér hljóðs, ok fekksk þegar. Hann mælti: “Hér hafa orðit harðir atburðir í mannalátum ok málasóknum. Mun ek nú sýna þat, at ek em lítilmenni: vil ek biðja Ásgrím ok þá menn aðra, er fyrir málum þessum eru, at þeir unni oss jafnsættis.” Fór hann þar um morgum fogrum orðum. (p. 408)

(Next day everyone went to the Law Rock. Síðu-Hallr stood up and asked for a hearing, which was granted at once. He said, ‘There have been harsh happenings here, in loss of life and lawsuits. Now I shall let it be seen that I am *lítilmenni* (‘little person’); I want to ask Ásgrím and those others who are behind these lawsuits, to grant us a settlement on even terms.’ He pleaded with them eloquently and persuasively.)

Hallr’s plea for an equal settlement provokes a negative response from Kári, whose refusal at this point to enter into any reconciliation is based on his estimation of the seriousness of the crime of the burning:

“Þótt allir sættisk aðrir á sín mál, þá skal ek eigi sættask, því at þér munuð vilja virða víg þessi í móti brennunni, en vér þolum þat eigi.” (p. 409)

(‘Even though all the others accept settlements, I shall never do so. You are trying to value the burning equally with these killings, and that we could never tolerate’.)

Ominously, Kári concludes with a punning threat against Flosi and his party:

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<sup>382</sup> *A Critical Introduction*, p. 148.

<sup>383</sup> ‘Displacement’, p. 61.

Hofðu Gríms at gamin / græðis elgs ok Helga, / rétt unnut þá runnar, /  
rennendr Níals brennu; / nú mun borgs í björgum / baugs hnykkjondum  
þykkja / lyngs at loknu þingi / ljóts annan veg þjóta. (pp. 410-11)

(Men have joked / About the burning of Njáll / and Grímr and Helgi; / But  
they do wrong, / And when this Alþingi / Comes to an end, / There will be  
grunting / To a different tune in Svínafell.)

But Hallr now shows that he has learnt from Þangbrandr that simply to balance rights and wrongs is to use scales as instruments of human justice, and so it is in reply to Kári's stanza that he articulates his rejection of all materialist concepts of justice, whether involving blood-vengeance or money compensation:

Hallr af Síðu mælti: "Allir menn vitu, hvern harm ek hefi fingit, at Ljótr, son minn, er látinn. Munu þat margir ætla, at hann muni dýrstr gorr af þeim monnum, er hér hafa látizk. En ek vil vinna þat til sætta at leggja son minn ógildan ok ganga þó til at veita þeim bæði tryggðir ok grið, er mínir mótstöðumenn eru." (pp. 411-12)

(Síðu-Hallr said, 'Everyone knows the great grief that I myself have suffered. My son Ljótr is dead. Many would think that he ought to be the most costly of all those who have lost their lives here. But to bring about a settlement I am prepared to claim no compensation for my son, and yet give pledges of peace to those men who are my adversaries.')

In refusing to assess the worth of his son in terms of money, Hallr moves away from the practice of Icelandic law and follows Scriptural teaching. The Biblical source for not valuing individuals in material, monetary terms is Matt. xviii, 1-10, the Gospel for the Feast of St Michael - the text, therefore, which Hallr would have heard Þangbrandr read on the day he was converted. The reading begins:

In illa hora accesserunt discipuli ad Jesum, dicentes: Quis, putas, major est in regno cælorum? Et advocans Jesus parvulum, statuit eum in medio eorum, et dixit: Amen dico vobis, nisi conversi fueritis et efficiamini sicut parvuli, non intrabitis in regnum cælorum. Quicumque ergo humiliaverit se sicut parvulus iste, hic est major in regno cælorum.

(At that time the disciples came to Jesus and asked, 'Who is the greatest in the kingdom of Heaven? He called a child, set him in front of them, and said, 'I tell you this: unless you are converted and become like children you will not enter into the kingdom of Heaven. Whoever, therefore, shall humble himself to be like this child, he is the greatest in the kingdom of Heaven.')

Commenting on these verses, in probably the most influential medieval commentary on Matthew, Jerome asks:

what does this sudden question of the Apostles mean? ‘Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?’ ... They supposed that Peter was preferred before all the Apostles, because he had been matched with the Lord in the payment of tax.<sup>384</sup>

Verse 10, the last of the Lesson, contains Christ’s warning to the disciples not to despise one of these little ones (*unum ex his pusillis*), ‘because in Heaven their angels do always behold the face of My Father’. Jerome’s exegesis of this verse has been quoted above (3.7): ‘Great is the dignity of souls, that each one should have from its birth an angel appointed to guard it!’ The point of these words is that each individual’s worth is spiritual, rather than material: every Christian soul, born at the moment of baptism, is of potentially equal value in the eyes of God, regardless of social standing or wealth. Viewed in these terms, that is to say spiritually, Hallr’s son is of the same value as every other Christian.

In 3.5 above it was suggested that the author wished to increase the importance, which he had inherited from tradition, of the role played by Hallr in the conversion of the nation, and that he accordingly accelerated the process of his conversion and baptism, having it all occur on the one day, Michaelmas. But the haste with which Hallr responds to Pangbrandr’s mission is further explained by reference to the Gospel for the day, for Christ’s rebuke to the disciples contains a plea for the urgent need for conversion: *nisi conversi fueritis et efficiamini sicut parvuli, non intrabitis in regnum cælorum*. Hallr is immediately converted, and when, later, the killing of his son puts his faith to the test, his actions reveal that he is also a *parvulus*: “*Mun ek nú sýna þat, at ek em lítilmenni*”. *Lítilmenni*, with the literal meaning ‘small-person’, is semantically very close to *parvulus* (in verses 2, 3, 4, 5 of Matthew 18). *Lítilmenni* is even closer in meaning and connotation to the Latin *pusillus* (in verses 6, 10 of Matthew 18), as both may be interpreted metaphorically, as terms of abuse. For example, when Unnr the Deep-minded first arrives in Iceland, after her hazardous escape and journey from Scotland<sup>385</sup>, and her brother, Helgi bjólan, offers hospitality to only half her company, she accuses him of being *lítilmenni* (‘small-minded, mean-spirited’). Hallr’s words, “*at ek em lítilmenni*”, may accordingly be interpreted as a self-deprecating message to the Alþingi: ‘that I am a

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<sup>384</sup> *Comm. in Matheum*, Bk. iii, CCSL 77, p. 156. The apostles ask the question because of what occurs in the final verse of the preceding chapter of Matthew. Here, Christ instructs Peter to open the mouth of the first fish that he catches, where he will find a silver coin which will pay the tax for both of them (*aperto ore ejus, invenies staterem: illum sumens, da eis pro me et te*). According to Jerome, the other apostles fear that this means that Christ places a monetary value on Peter equal with himself.

<sup>385</sup> *Laxdæla saga*, chapter 5.

person of no significance’<sup>386</sup>. *Pusillus* carries like negative associations of pettiness or insignificance<sup>387</sup>.

‘Spiritual smallness’ was recognised as a metaphor for the humility of the true believer. Epiphanius Latinus makes this clear in his commentary on this passage from Matthew, when discussing the significance of the word *parvulus*. To the apostles’ question: ‘Quis maior sit in regno caelorum’, the question which introduces the Michaelmas Gospel reading (Matt. xviii, 1), Epiphanius answers: *ipse sit maior, qui minimus esse voluerit*<sup>388</sup> (let him be the greatest who shall have wished to be the smallest / least). The Scriptural example of this kind of humility is the apostle Paul (*Paulus* = ‘Small’), who received that name upon his conversion, and who referred to himself deprecatingly as ‘the least of the apostles, that am not meet to be called an apostle’<sup>389</sup>. The name Paul was from an early period interpreted as ‘humble’: *En Origenis segir, at Saulus þyðiz ofriðarmaðr en Paulus litilatr ... ok sva litillatr, at hann kallaði sik minztan allra guðs postola* (But Origen says that Saul is interpreted ‘man of warfare’, while Paul means ‘humble’ ... so humble, indeed, that he called himself the least of all God’s apostles)<sup>390</sup>.

The man of warfare has here been converted, and has become spiritually small. In terms of the different values in evidence among those present at the Alþingi, the *lítilmenni*, with his new values, will attempt reconciliation, rather than resort to the retaliation and warfare associated with the old. Indeed, it is a defining characteristic of the *parvulus* not to act in accordance with the old law of ‘an eye for an eye’. Epiphanius Latinus, in the commentary referred to above, states that: ‘the little one has no knowledge of being held by anger or of growing angry; he does not know how to repay evil for evil’ (*Parvulus enim ira teneri vel irascere non novit; malum pro malo reddere nescit*<sup>391</sup>). This desire for peace is prompted by true, Christian humility, as Augustine makes clear:

Satt lítillæti er þat, segir Augustinus, at bióða öngum rangt ok þola fyrir guðs sakir þat er siálfum er misboðit<sup>392</sup>.

<sup>386</sup> Robert Cook translates the phrase as: ‘that I’m a man of no importance’ (*Njal’s Saga*, p. 274).

<sup>387</sup> Lewis and Short, *A Latin Dictionary*, s.v. ‘pusillus’.

<sup>388</sup> Erikson, *Epiphanius*, p. 43; also at PLS III, col. 866.

<sup>389</sup> Ego enim sum minimus apostolorum, qui non sum dignus vocari apostolus: I Cor. xv, 9.

<sup>390</sup> *Pals saga post.* II, ch. 7 (*Post.*, p. 243). Augustine comments: ‘but Paul is little; whence in a way interpreting his own name, he says, “I am the least of the Apostles”’ (Augustine, NPNF 1<sup>st</sup> series, vol. 6, p. 422).

<sup>391</sup> *Interpretatio Evangeliorum*, ch.27, Erikson, *Sancti Epiphani*, p. 43; PLS 3, col. 866.

<sup>392</sup> *Maríu saga* I, p. 12.

(Augustine says that it is true humility to offer wrong to nobody, and to suffer for God's sake that wrong which is offered to oneself.)

Hallr acts in the spirit of the Gospel for Michaelmas. In his humility he shows himself to be guided by St Michael, whose very name means 'Who is as God?' and who therefore represents the power of humility, the counter-type to, and victorious against, the pride of Antichrist:

Michael þyðisc hver sem guð ... En af því er sva á bocom sagt at í ennda heims þessa scyli Mykael beriasc á mót ok í gægn Antikriste ok drepa hann. því at þat er maclect at sa er í ofmetnaðe vildi magnasc í gogn guði. verði af þeim engle drepen er þat synir í nafne sino at engi er slicr sem guð<sup>393</sup>.

(Michael is translated: 'Who is as God?' ... But concerning this, it is said in books that at the end of this world Michael shall fight opposed to and against Antichrist, and will kill him. Because it is fitting that he who in his pride wished to puff himself up against God should be killed by that angel who reveals in his name that none is equal to God.)

### 3.9 Þórhallr Ásgrímsson: justice at the Alþingi

Þórhallr is the foster-son of Njáll, who had taught him the law. It is he who masterminds the prosecution of the burners at the Alþingi. His legal knowledge is total, as he shows in the way he repeatedly out-manoeuvres Flosi's lawyer, Eyjólfur Bólverksson, who is himself 'one of the three greatest lawyers in Iceland' (ch. 138). Njáll's example and training mean that Þórhallr would choose first to go to law, and only resort to violence when there is no alternative.

On the other hand, he has human emotions, and the killing, and in such a manner, of his beloved foster-father provokes in him an extreme physical reaction: his whole body swells up, blood gushes from his ears, and he faints (ch. 132). And later, at the Alþingi, when the legal action is just about to begin (ch. 142): *var andlit hans at sjá sem á blóð sæi, en stórt hagl hraut ór augum honum* ('his face was like blood to look at, and great gusts of hail gushed from his eyes': p. 378). The tears like hailstones are a conventional motif, used to portray simultaneously great grief and the desire for violent retaliation<sup>394</sup>, but Þórhallr holds himself, and all their party in check: "*Farið þér at engu allæstir ok gerið nú allt sem réttast*" ('Don't be too hasty, and do everything as correctly as you can': p. 378). He will give Flosi the opportunity to plead his case in open court.

<sup>393</sup> *Admonitio ualde necessaria. Sanctorum angelorum. in die sancti Michaelis* (GNH pp.136-7).

<sup>394</sup> See Guðrún Nordal, *Ethics and action*, pp. 48-49.

Flosi needs a skilled advocate, and cynically bribes a corrupt lawyer, the above-mentioned Eyjólfr Bqlverksson, to conduct his defence – cynically, because he has previously been told that ‘death will come to the man who pleads the defence for the burning’ (ch. 138). He first tries to win Eyjólfr by flattery, but the lawyer sees through the strategem, and starts to move away:

Hallbjörn sterki þreif til hans [Eyjólfr] ok setti hann niðr í millum þeira Bjarna ok mælti: “*Eigi fellr tré við it fyrsta hogg, vinr,*” segir hann, “ok sit hér hjá oss.” Flosi dró gullhring af hendi sér ok mælti: “Þenna hring vil ek gefa þér, Eyjólfr, til vináttu ok liðveizlu ok sýna þér svá, at ek vil eigi ginna þik.” (pp. 367-68)

(Hallbjörn the Strong took hold of him and set him down again between himself and Bjarni, and said: ‘No tree falls at the first stroke, my friend. Just sit here beside us for a while.’ Flosi drew from his arm a gold bracelet and said, ‘I want to give you this bracelet, Eyjolf, for your friendship and support, and to show you that I have no wish to deceive you.’)

It will be seen that Flosi’s last utterance here is a direct lie, given that he knows that Eyjólfr is doomed if he agrees to take on the defence.

The metaphor of harvesting a tree, applied here to the bribing of Eyjólfr, is spoken in a formula that has been used once before in *Njáls saga*, when Gestr Oddleifsson seeks to comfort the missionary Þangbrandr, who is depressed at the prospect of leaving Iceland while the nation’s conversion to the law of God is still far from completed (pp. 268-69):

“Þú hefir þó mest at gort,” segir Gestr, “þó at qðrum verði auðit í lög at leiða. En þat er sem mælt er, at eigi fellr tré við it fyrsta hogg.”

(‘But you have done most of the work, even though it shall fall to others to succeed in making it law,’ said Gest. ‘A tree does not fall at the first stroke, as the saying goes.’)

The author seems to have set up deliberate points of comparison between the contexts of these two conversations. Each occurrence functions as a comment on the progress of a process of persuasion. And on each occasion, there is someone present who, the reader has just been informed, has foreknowledge. We are told that Gestr Oddleifsson ‘was so very wise a man that he foretold men’s fates’ (ch. 103), while Bjarni Brodd-Helgason, the fourth member of the group that includes Flosi, Eyjólfr, and Hallbjörn the Strong, has just remarked that ‘it will mean death for the man who undertakes the defence of the Burners’. The crucial difference between the two scenes, however, is that Þangbrandr

seeks to convert the Icelanders, and thereby bring them the hope of eternal life, while Flosi, on the other hand, attempts to pervert Eyjólfur, and by doing so to doom him.

In *Njáls saga*, then, the formulaic metaphor is ambivalent: it refers either to a creative, life-giving process, or to a cynically death-dealing one. The Scriptural source for this ambivalent tree-metaphor is Matt. xii, 33: 'Either make the tree good, and its fruit good, or else make the tree corrupt, and its fruit corrupt, for the tree is known by its fruit.' In his commentary on this verse<sup>395</sup>, Augustine points out that 'tree' is a metaphor for each individual, admonishing his congregation: 'Let each one then be a good tree'. Augustine links this verse, through Matt. xiii, 10 ('Now is the axe laid unto the root of the trees; every tree which bringeth not forth good fruit shall be hewn down, and cast into the fire'), with Luc. xiii, 6 ff. The relevant passage, not quoted in full by Augustine, reads:

A man had a fig-tree growing in his vineyard; and he came looking for fruit on it, but found none. So he said to the vine-dresser; "Look here! For the last three years I have come looking for fruit on this fig-tree without finding any. Cut it down. Why should it go on using up the soil?" But he replied, "Leave it, sir, this one year while I dig round it and manure it. And if it bears next season, well and good; if not, you shall have it down."

The tree is spared for three years, but is to be cut down, if still barren, in the fourth. King Brian Boru pardons outlaws three times for the same crime, and only lets the law take its course after the fourth offence. Hrafn the Red, on his third and last chance, is spared at Clontarf. Justice will be done at the Alþingi following the burning, and Eyjólfur Bqlverksson will die as a result. But first, he will be given three chances.

The long series of complex legal wrangling, much of it over the technicalities of court procedure, that is the mark of this Alþingi, has provoked varying responses from critics, most of whom have considered it as at best unnecessary.<sup>396</sup> But all the pages devoted by the author to this legal action, with their rehearsals and repetitions of legal formulas, the swearing-in of witnesses, the taking of oaths, only serve to show the law's inability to reach a verdict, where there is bribery and lying at the core of the defence. The legal process is paralysed, and the chief prosecuting lawyer, Þórhallr Ásgrímsson, *tók fótarmein svá mikít, at fyrir ofan qkkla var fóttrinn svá digr ok þrúttinn sem konulær, ok mátti hann ekki ganga nema við staf* ('had so large an abscess on his leg that above

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<sup>395</sup> Sermon xxii: NPNF 6., p. 332.

<sup>396</sup> For some details see the Introduction to this study.



the ankle it was as swollen and as thick as a woman's thigh, and he could not walk without a staff"): justice cannot act until the fourth offence has been committed.

Among the complexities of this legal action are the two crimes with which Þórhallr charges Flosi and Eyjólfir (ch. 144):

“nú er sú atfór þeira, at þeir munu engis ills svífask. Skalt þú nú ganga til þeira sem skjótast ok segja þeim, at Mqrðr stefni þeim báðum, Flosa ok Eyjólfir, um þat, er þeir hafa fé borit í dóminn, ok láta varða fjorbaugsgarð. Þá skal hann stefna þeim annarri stefnu um þat, er þeir báru vætti þau, er eigi áttu máli at skipta með þeim, ok gerðu í því þingsafglopun.”

(‘for their tactics make it clear that they will not shrink from doing any evil. Go back at once and tell them that Mqrðr charges both Flosi and Eyjólfir with using bribes in court, and that demands a sentence of lesser outlawry. He must then summons them on a further charge, concerning the fact that they brought in witnesses that were not relevant to the case, and in doing so committed contempt of court.’<sup>397</sup>)

In addition to these two misdemeanours, Flosi and Eyjólfir have already also attempted to deceive the court by the stratagem of having Flosi transfer his *goðorð* to his brother (ch. 141) and attach himself to the following of Áskell Þorketilsson. This simple trick would result in the prosecution's presenting the charges in the wrong Quarter Court: “Ok er fimmtardómsmál á þeim, ef þeir sækja í annan dóm en vera á” (‘and they are liable to a Fifth Court charge if they prosecute in the wrong court’). The plan has Flosi gloating (ch. 142): “Þat hlægir mik nú, Eyjólfir,” segir Flosi, “í hug mér, at þeim mun í brún bregða ok ofarliga kleyja, þá er þú berr fram vörnina” (‘It makes me laugh, Eyjólfir,’ said Flosi, ‘to think how they will grimace and tear their hair when you present our defence.’)

Eyjólfir and Flosi are therefore guilty already of three crimes against the court. Now they attempt another attack on the basis of procedural irregularity, another example of what Þórhallr had earlier (ch. 142) referred to as Eyjólfir's *logvillur* (‘legal falsehoods’). Eyjólfir accuses Mqrðr Valgarðsson, who is conducting the prosecution under advice from the bedridden Þórhallr, of making a technical mistake:

Fann þat til, at dæmt hafði hálf fjórða tylft, þar sem þrennar áttu, -  
“skulu vér nú sækja fimmtardómssakir várar á þá ok gera þá sekja.”

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<sup>397</sup> Einar Ólafur Sveinsson notes that this charge is an apparent misunderstanding of Icelandic law (ÍF 12, p. 395, n. 1). The point implied in the narrative, though, is that as far as the brilliant and uncorruptible lawyer Þórhallr is concerned, the charge is valid.

(He gave as his reason the fact that forty-two judges had given the verdict instead of only thirty-six, as the law demanded, - 'and we shall now bring our own Fifth Court actions against them and have them all sentenced to outlawry.')

This time, Eyjólfur's stratagem threatens to corrupt the Fifth Court, the very forum which should guard the integrity of the law. But for those who, like Eyjólfur, are determined to persist in their evil, there can be no fourth chance. Justice must destroy them. When he hears the news of Eyjólfur's latest piece of deceit, the lame Þórhallr is stirred to violent action:

En er hann heyrði þetta, brá honum svá við, at hann mátti ekki orð mæla. Hann spratt upp ór rúminu ok greip spjótit Skarpheðinsnaut tveim hǫndum ok rak í gegnum fótinn á sér. Var þar á holdit ok kveisunaglinn á spjótinu, því at hann skar út ór fœtinum, en blóðfossinn fellr ok vágföllin, svá at lœkr fell eptir gólfinu. Hann gekk þá út ór búðinni óhaltr ok fór svá hart, at sendimaðrinn fekk eigi fylgt honum; hann ferr þar til, er hann kom til fimmtardómsins. Þá mœtti hann Grími inum rauða, frænda Flosa, ok jafnskjótt sem þeir fundusk, lagði Þórhallr til hans spjótinu, ok kom í skjöldinn, ok klofnaði hann í sundr, ok gekk spjótit í gegnum hann, svá at út kom í millum herðanna. Kastaði Þórhallr honum dauðum af spjótinu.

(When Þórhallr heard this he was so upset that he could not speak a word. He sprang out of his bed and seized his spear, Skarpheðinn's gift, with both hands and drove it through his leg. Flesh and the core of the boil clung to the spear when he had cut open his leg, and a gush of blood and a flow of pus poured like a stream across the floor. He then walked out of the booth without a limp and moved so fast that the messenger could not keep up with him, all the way to the Fifth Court. There he came across Grímr the Red, Flosi's kinsman, and as soon as they met Þórhallr thrust at him with the spear and pierced his shield and split it in two, and the spear passed through him so that the point came out between his shoulders. Þórhallr threw him off the spear, dead.)

Judgement is executed on Eyjólfur, and he is killed by Kári in the ensuing battle. Once more, the author of *Njáls saga* presents judgement in terms of the vision that the missionary Þangbrandr had shown to Síðu-Hallr. Þórhallr cuts out the poison from his leg, an action which energises him and the forces of justice. Christ had included within the Gospel for Michaelmas the warning that corruption has to be cut out: *Si autem manus tua vel pes tuus scandalizat te, abscide eum et projice abs te* ('If, however, your hand or your foot is your undoing, cut it off and fling it away': Matt. xviii, 8<sup>398</sup>). The Middle Ages interpreted *scandalizare* as meaning *a deo separare* ('to separate from God'), and

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<sup>398</sup> Cf. Matt. v, 30: *Ef limr þinn styggir þik, snid hann af ok kasta brott fra þer*: Kirby, *Biblical Quotations* I, p. 147.

therefore, by extension, ‘to corrupt’. In the same passage where he defines *separare* in this way, Epiphanius Latinus<sup>399</sup> says that anything or anyone who leads us into sin: *tamquam membrum putrefactum excidamus et proiciamus a nobis* (‘let us cut out as it were a rotten member, and throw it away from us’). The medieval reader was therefore perfectly capable of reading Þórhallr’s excision of the sepsis in his leg in terms of this verse from Scripture. The words of Epiphanius may be compared with these lines from the saga: *Var þar á holdit ok kveisunaglinn á spjótinu, því at hann skar út ór fætinum ... kastaði Þórhallr honum dauðum af spjótinu* (‘On the spear then were flesh and the core of the boil, which he had cut out of his leg *membrum putrefactum excidamus* ... Þórhallr threw him *proiciamus* off the spear, dead.’) Contrary to Lönnroth’s opinion concerning this episode, Þórhallr does not act because ‘his passions have finally defeated his self-control’<sup>400</sup>, but because wickedness must receive just punishment.

### 3.10 Last-minute repentance: Ingjaldr of Keldur

Ingjaldr of Keldur is an example of someone who is three times shown mercy, in this case, by Njáll. He comes extremely close to committing a fourth offence, which would have doomed him: he agrees to take part in the attack on the Njálssons, and swears an oath on pain of death to this effect (ch. 124). His sister, Hróðný, challenges his decision, reminding him (p. 319) that: “*Njáll hefir þik þrysvar leyst ór skógi*” (‘Njáll has saved you from outlawry three times’).

“Svá er nú þó komit,” segir hann, “at líf mitt liggr við, ef ek geri eigi þetta.” “Eigi mun þat,” segir hon, “lífa muntú allt at einu ok heita þá góðr maðr.”

(‘The position now,’ he said, ‘is that my life is at stake, if I do not do it.’  
‘Not at all,’ she said, ‘you will certainly live, and be called a good man.’)

Ingjaldr repents of his decision, and does not take part in the attack. On their way home from the burning, Flosi and his party take a detour in order to meet Ingjaldr and punish him (ch. 130)<sup>401</sup>. Their encounter can be compared with Þórhallr’s actions that open the battle at the Alþingi: Ingjaldr and Þórhallr each receive a leg-wound from a spear, and each of them immediately thereafter kills a kinsman of Flosi’s with the

<sup>399</sup> *Interpretatio Evangeliorum*, ch. 27: ‘Scandalizare est a deo separare. Nam subiungit dicens: Si autem manus ...’.

<sup>400</sup> (*A Critical Introduction*, pp. 112-13); Lönnroth concludes: ‘the author of *Njála* evidently wants his audience to consider that a hero who becomes a slave to his passions destroys the chance of a peaceful settlement’.

<sup>401</sup> The Sigfússons want to kill Ingjaldr, but Flosi is willing to spare his life, on condition that Ingjaldr grants him self-judgement.

same spear. Each of them also suffers from a swollen, poisoned leg. But there is also one vast difference between them: whereas, once the innocent Þórhallr has gouged the poison out of his leg, he strides to the court without a limp, for the thrice-pardoned Ingjaldr, who had come so close to committing a fourth offence (p. 344):

Blástr kom í fótinn Ingjaldr; fór hann þá til Hjalta, ok græddi hann Ingjald, ok var hann þó jafnan haltr síðan.

(Mortification entered Ingjaldr's leg; he then went to Hjalti, and he cured him, although he was lame ever after.)

Hróðný had told Ingjaldr that he would live, and he does so. The complete verse at Matt. xviii, 8 reads: 'If your hand or your foot is your undoing, cut it off and fling it away; it is better for you to enter into life maimed or lame, than to keep two hands or two feet and be thrown into the eternal fire.' The sepsis in Ingjaldr's leg is cut out, and as a penitent, lame, he enters life: justice and mercy, acting together, have saved him.

### 3.11 The blind Ámundi Hqskuldsson

The author of *Njáls saga* was no romanticist, and he insists on justice as well as mercy. And despite the killings that have occurred at the battle at the Alþingi, there are those present who feel that the demands of justice have still not been satisfied. The stanza uttered by Kári at the Alþingi is a clear indication of this, however much Hallr's reconciliatory words are applauded. Vésteinn Ólason suggests that the burning must be avenged: 'because of the great sympathy which the saga has created for Njáll and his family, and within the saga everyone seems to acknowledge that vengeance is unavoidable, even those who suffer most by it'. The saga, he says, leaves the reader with 'a mood of resignation about what has taken place'. He identifies the cause of this mood as the sense of the loss of 'a grandeur and validity' in the old, superseded society, a society whose values the author views sympathetically. Vésteinn Ólason's conclusion is that: 'the *Njáls saga* author has the option of rejecting the old ideology, but chooses not to do so'<sup>402</sup>. If that were so, however, there would be no reason on artistic grounds for the author to have Kári make a penitential pilgrimage to Rome. It will here be argued that, if the author treats the old ideology of vengeance sympathetically, as it operated within the pre-Christian world<sup>403</sup>, he reveals in his portrayal of events during the first

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<sup>402</sup> *Dialogues*, pp. 204-05.

<sup>403</sup> The honourable Gunnarr of Hlíðarendi is reluctant to avenge insults, but warns that he will retaliate in equal measure when sufficiently provoked (see 2.4 above).

period after the Conversion his feeling that that ideology has no place in a Christian society.

The story of Ámundi the Blind might be thought to provide immediate evidence against the view that there may be in *Njáls saga* a discourse of reconciliation and love based on Christianity. Ámundi's father had been killed by a certain Lýtingr, and the killer had refused to pay Ámundi any compensation for his father's death. Denied justice in this way, the blind Ámundi prays to God that he be given his sight. His sight is granted him for a few seconds, during which he kills his father's slayer. There is an obvious ethical problem in God's apparently performing a miracle - the granting of sight to a man blind from birth - in order that he may commit a revenge-killing<sup>404</sup>. The critical debate over the morality of this episode remains unresolved.

For Finnur Jónsson, the episode is quite simply: 'nach unserem gefühl eine blasphemie',<sup>405</sup> while Einar Ólafur Sveinsson states that, although 'the phraseology of the passage' indicates that the author was relying on legendary miracle-works when he wrote the chapter, this material was so 'freely adapted...to his own purposes...that Ámundi can perform such an unchristian act as to take blood vengeance on his father's slayer!'<sup>406</sup> These critics do not question whether the author approves of this revenge-killing. Maxwell, however, comments that 'our sympathies are with Ámundi', and concludes that 'the symmetry of poetic (*sic*) justice links Lýtingr's killing of Njál's son with Ámundi's vengeance on Lýtingr'<sup>407</sup>. Einar Ólafur Sveinsson, directing his attention to the author, comments that the nearly blasphemous nature of Ámundi's act - the saga is at this point 'unchristian in its ethics' - is evidence that *Njála* was probably not written by a cleric,<sup>408</sup> a conjecture which perhaps stems from the view that only a layman, with a confused understanding of theology, could imagine that such an act might ever be condoned by God. Gottzmann, on the other hand, accepts that Ámundi's revenge is the

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<sup>404</sup> We are told that Ámundi *hafði blindr verit borinn; hann var þó mikill vexti ok qflugr* (had been born blind, but was of large stature and powerful: ÍF 12, p. 248).

<sup>405</sup> He is here commenting on Ámundi's praising of God, which comes immediately before the killing. He goes on to pass stern judgement on the artistic merits of the episode as a whole: 'die ganze (selbstverständlich erdichtete) geschichte sieht aus wie eine misslungene nachbildung einer legende' (*Njáls saga*, p. 248, notes 16 and 17).

<sup>406</sup> *Literary Masterpiece*, p. 178.

<sup>407</sup> 'Pattern', p. 38.

<sup>408</sup> ÍF 12, p. civ: 'Í 106. kap. er frásögnin af því, er augu Ámunda blinda opnuðust...Hins vegar er sagan þar ókristileg að siðferði...og er leikmanni frekar trúandi til en klerki'.

result of a miracle<sup>409</sup>, but Andersson asks a pertinent question: 'Is it a miracle, or the mockery of a miracle?'<sup>410</sup>

Lönnroth, who feels that the author had a 'clerical mind', attempts a justification of Ámundi's act in terms of a well-known medieval ethic:

The old ethics of revenge could also be legitimized by the Augustinian doctrine of the Rightful War (*Bellum iustum*) and by the numerous examples of honorable deeds of revenge found in the Old Testament<sup>411</sup>.

This last approach is doubtful. The conditions under which war could be justified were extremely limited and carefully defined: the concept of the 'just war' (*bellum justum*) could in no way be invoked to give general sanction to acts of revenge. While Augustine defines just wars as 'those that avenge injuries' (*Iusta autem bella definiri solent, quae ulciscuntur injurias*)<sup>412</sup>, he also states that 'cruelty in revenge' (*ulciscendi crudelitas*) is among those things that 'are rightly condemned in war' (*haec sunt quae in bellis jure culpantur*)<sup>413</sup>. Furthermore, canon law decreed that an act of war remained unjustified until those involved had undergone penance<sup>414</sup>.

The author of *Njáls saga* would therefore be compelled to make explicit mention of any penance imposed on a character whose act of revenge he wished to justify in terms of the concept of the 'just war', precisely to prove the 'justness' of the action. Yet there is no mention of Ámundi's undergoing penance. Therefore, either the author did not include the doctrine of the *bellum justum* within the ethical framework of his narrative, or he was concerned to make the point that Ámundi fails to meet the demands of the 'just war' - in other words, that his revenge is *not* justified.

Maxwell, too, has attempted to defend the morality of the episode. He states that 'it would be easy to cite evidence that it (viz. the episode of the miracle) would have looked less odd to thirteenth-century readers than it does to most of us'. Unfortunately, however, he does not bring any such evidence forward, and simply claims that Ámundi's act is one of 'natural justice and sanctioned by God'.<sup>415</sup> Lönnroth makes a similar case, suggesting that the passage: 'reveals the author's subtle theological and legalistic mind.

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<sup>409</sup> *Rechtsproblematik*, p. 329: die Rache Ámunds, die nur durch göttliches Eingreifen möglich wird.

<sup>410</sup> *Growth*, p. 198.

<sup>411</sup> *A Critical Introduction*, p. 145.

<sup>412</sup> *Quaestiones in Heptateuchum* vi.10.

<sup>413</sup> *Contra Faustum Manichaeum* xxii, 74.

<sup>414</sup> See Cross, 'The ethic of war', *passim*; the quotations from Augustine are taken from this paper, p. 271.

<sup>415</sup> 'Pattern', p. 38.

The phrase *rétt fyrir guði* refers to the Natural Law implanted by God in the human heart<sup>416</sup>. It should be noted, however, that the phrase *rétt fyrir guði* is not a comment passed by the author on Ámundi's actions. The words are uttered by Ámundi himself *before* the killing of Lýtingr; they are therefore not a positive evaluation of his own intentions, but are his own negative comment on Lýtingr's refusal to compensate him for his father's death: Ámundi feels that this cannot be *rétt fyrir guði*.

It is not clear whether Maxwell's use of the term 'natural justice' is informal, or whether he means by it a formal legal concept, the translation of some such term as *ius naturale*. For Lönnroth, however, 'Natural Law' appears to be a technical term, translating *lex naturalis* (or the less usual *lex naturae*), and he introduces the concept as a doctrine: 'The Doctrine of Natural Law and Natural Religion'<sup>417</sup>. However, orthodox thirteenth-century views of what constituted natural law offer no support for the claim that the author of *Njála* sought to justify Ámundi's actions in these terms.

Acting in accordance with 'Natural Law' does not simply mean doing what one sincerely feels in the circumstances to be just. Aquinas states:

this is the first command of law, "that good is to be sought and done, evil to be avoided"; all other commandments of natural law (*praecepta legis naturae*) are based on this<sup>418</sup>.

Hugh of St Victor ('the second Augustine') articulates the orthodox understanding of natural law, showing the Scriptural sources behind the thinking:

There were two precepts under the natural law and three sacraments. The two precepts: "See thou never do to another what thou wouldst hate to have done to thee," (cf. Tob. iv, 16); and, "All things whatsoever you would that men should do to you, do you also the same to them".<sup>419</sup>

It was through the influential Gratian, and commentaries upon his work, that the medieval audience came to know *ius naturale* as a familiar and technical concept: it is that by which:

everyone is commanded to do to others what he would have done to himself, and forbidden to do to others what he would not have done to himself.

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<sup>416</sup> *A Critical Introduction*, p. 145 (in a section, pp.143 ff., entitled 'Christian Attitudes to Pagan Law').

<sup>417</sup> *A Critical Introduction*, p. 137.

<sup>418</sup> Hoc est ergo primum praeceptum legis, quod "bonum est faciendum et prosequendum, et malum vitandum"; et super hoc fundantur omnia alia praecepta legis naturae: see *St. Thomas Aquinas, Summa Theologiae*, vol. 28: trans. Gilby, pp. 80-81.

<sup>419</sup> Deferrari, Hugh of St. Victor, p. 191. Tob. iv, 16 (Vulgate) reads: *quod ab alio odis fieri tibi vide ne alteri tu aliquando facias*.

Dorothy Bethurum has noted that commentators on Gratian state that:

the natural law, which is God's will, is found in "the law and the gospels". For example, "Naturale jus, quod in lege et evangelio continentur, quo prohibetur quisque alii facere quod sibi nolit fieri"<sup>420</sup>.

The thirteenth-century Icelandic audience could therefore only have believed that Ámundi acted as he did out of a sense of natural law, if they had also been led from the saga to believe that he would have been content to be himself the object of a revenge-killing. The audience would have been much more likely to have considered Ámundi's actions to have been completely opposed to the central principle of God's law, which, after all, is the basis of natural law:

Petr mælti: "eða veiztu eigi, at oll guðs lög eru í friði ok til friðar sett? ... ok slíkar syndir [misþykkiur með monnum, ran ok orrostur margar] megu eigi bœttar verða, nema þeir hverfi aptr til friðarins ok sættiz missatir. Ok verður af því friðrinn upphaf ok niðrlag guðs laga."<sup>421</sup>

(Peter said: 'or do you not know that all God's laws are established in peace and towards peace? And such sins [discords among men, plundering and many battles] may not be mended unless they turn back to peace and their disagreements are settled. And from this it comes that peace is the beginning and end of God's law'.)

It may be noted at this point that Ámundi is not the only character in the saga whose powers of vision are commented on. Otkell Skarffsson's eyesight is unusually poor (*Otkell var ekki gloggskyggn* - ch. 49), while that of Björn of Mörk is particularly good (*Björn var maðr skyggn* - ch.148). Otkell becomes involved in a dispute with Gunnarr of Hlíðarendi, and is killed by him, a killing which marks a significant step towards Gunnarr's final outlawry. Björn is the companion of Kári while the latter seeks revenge for the burning, after the law case has collapsed. Ámundi is a suitor for legal redress over the killing of his father.

Kári seeks revenge because any legal settlement following the burning has been prevented by the lawyer Eyjólfur Bqlverksson's cynical manipulation of the process of law. The duping of Otkell by the evil Skammkell also prevents a legal settlement between Otkell and Gunnarr, and Otkell's death follows from the lack of any settlement. Ámundi, frustrated in his attempts to gain any redress, prays to God for help, and is granted his sight. There seems to be a pattern here, with the author commenting on the

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<sup>420</sup> Bethurum, *Homilies of Wulfstan*, p. 326, note on lines 32-34 of Homily XC.

<sup>421</sup> *Petr's saga postola* IIA, ch. 15 (*Post.*, p. 174).



eyesight of characters who are associated with disputes that remain unsettled by process of law.

Ámundi's story might also be compared with that of Ósvífr, the father of Hallgerðr's first husband, at the time when he, too, was unable to get legal satisfaction. The two cases are in some respects mirror images of each other. Ámundi is seeking redress from the killer of his father, while Ósvífr is in pursuit of the killer of his son. At the moment that Ámundi draws close to Lýtingr, the supernatural power of God temporarily grants him sight; Ósvífr is in close pursuit of his quarry when he and his men are temporarily blinded, by the power of witchcraft:

Nú er frá því at segja, at þeir Ósvífr riðu á hálsinn ok menn hans; þá kom þoka mikil í móti þeim ... Litlu síðar sé sorti mikill fyrir augu þeim, svá at þeir sá ekki, ok fellu þeir þá af baki ok týndu hestunum. (p. 38)

(Meanwhile, Ósvífr and his men were riding over the hill when a thick bank of fog advanced to meet them ... A little later a great darkness descended on them, blinding their eyes. They toppled off their horses and lost them.)

In this example, the loss of sight is caused by malignant powers.

God performs not one but two acts in the story of Ámundi's revenge: he gives Ámundi his sight, and he takes it away again. In Scripture, the removal of an individual's sight by God, or one of his agents, is invariably a sign of his displeasure, and the blinding of the enemies of God becomes a commonplace motif in hagiographic literature.<sup>422</sup> Well-known examples include the men of Sodom (Genesis xix, 11), the force sent by the king of Aram to seize the prophet Elisha (2 Reg. vi, 18), and Elymas the sorcerer, the 'son of the devil and enemy of all goodness' (Acta Apost. xiii, 8-12).<sup>423</sup> It is against this Scriptural and hagiographic background that the author of *Njála* guides the reader to make a negative moral judgement of Ámundi's acts. The moment when Ámundi becomes once more blind (*ok var hann alla ævi blindr síðan* – 'and he was blind for the rest of his life') has the same wording as is found in the account of the blinding of Elymas the sorcerer, as recounted in *Páls saga* II, chapter 7. The latter account also supplies the moral judgement, however: *Þaa fell su guðs reiði aa hann*

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<sup>422</sup> Within the medieval exegetical tradition, blindness had always the potential to be interpreted as representing evil. Aquinas, for example, states that: 'a blind man is possessed of goodness inasmuch as he lives; and of evil, inasmuch as he lacks sight' (*Summa Theologiae*, Ia 2ae, 18.2). See O'Connor, *Aquinas and Natural Law*, p. 39.

<sup>423</sup> The great exception to the Scriptural rule that sight is removed by divine displeasure is the blinding of Saul (Acta Apost. ix, 8 ff.), who is on his way to persecute Christians. It may be noted that Saul's conversion is accompanied by the recovery of his sight (Acta Apost. ix, 17-19).

*þegar...at hann var blindr alla æfvi síðan* – ‘then God’s anger descended on him immediately... so that he was blind for the rest of his life’.<sup>424</sup>

God’s other, earlier act in the story of Ámundi is of course to give him sight. The Scriptures, and especially hagiographic writings, offer far more examples of men recovering sight than losing it. But these must all be discounted as possible models for Ámundi’s being given sight, since all of them had previously had sight and had subsequently lost it. Medieval commentaries stress the distinction between these individuals, who could be cured by (divinely aided) men, and the man who, like Ámundi, was blind from birth (Joh. ix). This man Christ alone could cure, as Augustine makes clear in Tractate 91 on John’s Gospel:

And yet there were some works which Christ did which none other man did: as, when... He opened the eyes of a man that was born blind.<sup>425</sup>

This is the reason that the many similar cases (*fleiri dæmi þessu lík mætti nefna*) cited by Einar Ólafur Sveinsson<sup>426</sup> cannot be accepted as relevant to the study of the Ámundi episode.

However, it is not so much the miraculous gift of sight to the man born blind that makes the episode recounted in Joh. ix particularly appropriate as the model for the story of Ámundi. The real significance of this miracle is that the gift of sight was interpreted in the Middle Ages as an allegory of conversion. Augustine comments on Christ’s words: “I am the light of the world: he that followeth me shall not walk in darkness”.

For the Lord gives light to the blind. Therefore we, brethren, having the eye-salve of faith, are now enlightened. For his spittle did before mingle with the earth, by which the eyes of him who was born blind were anointed. We, too, have been born blind of Adam, and have need of Him to enlighten us. He mixed spittle with clay: “the Word was made flesh, and dwelt among us.” He mixed spittle with earth; hence it was predicted, “Truth has sprung from the earth;” and He said Himself, “I am the way, the truth, and the life.”<sup>427</sup>

When the man blind from birth had been healed, he was expelled from the synagogue by the Jewish authorities (v. 34). This was interpreted as representing a move from the old

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<sup>424</sup> *Post.*, p. 243 (other MSS have *leiddr blindr*, *leiðibindr*). The reference here to life-long blindness is not Scriptural. See Acta Apost. xiii, 11: ‘And now, behold, the hand of the Lord is upon you (*manus Domini super te*), and you shall be blind, not seeing the sun for a season (*usque ad tempus*). And immediately there fell on him a mist and a darkness; and he went about seeking some to lead him by the hand’.

<sup>425</sup> *Homilies on the Gospel of John*, p. 361.

<sup>426</sup> ÍF 12, p. 273, n. 3.

<sup>427</sup> Tractate 34: *Homilies on the Gospel of John*, p. 202 (on Joh. viii, 12).

Mosaic law to that of Christ (in Tractate 44, on Joh. ix, Augustine interprets Christ's sending the blind man to wash in the pool of Siloam (v. 7) as baptism in Christ<sup>428</sup>).

From the account given in Joh. ix, we learn that Christ is 'come into this world' not only 'to give sight to the sightless', but also 'to make blind those who see'. The allegorical interpretation of the second of these statements lies behind the moral that the author of *Njála* intended to convey through his narrative of the fate of Ámundi the Blind. By 'those who see', whom Christ makes blind, are meant those pharisaic individuals, 'disciples of Moses', who proudly refuse to listen to Christ's teaching, because they feel they already know the truth about God's law and equate it with the old law. They are offered Christ's law, and refuse it, their guilt consisting of pride rather than ignorance. Christ tells them: 'If you were blind, you would not be guilty, but because you say "We see", your guilt remains' (vv. 39-41)<sup>429</sup>.

At the moment when Ámundi prays to God, he has not decided which course of action to pursue if given his sight:

enda kann ek at segja þér, ef ek væra heileygr báðum augum, at hafa skylda ek annathvart fyrir fœður minn fébætr eða mannhefndir, enda skipti guð með okkr! (p. 273)

(And I can tell you this, that if my eyes were blest with sight, I would get full compensation for my father or else take blood-revenge. May God judge between us.)

However, on being offered the divine grace that can generate conversion, Ámundi rejects it, because, like the Pharisees, he 'sees' the truth about the will of divine justice:

Lofaðr sé guð, dróttinn minn! Sér nú, hvat hann vill. (p. 273)

(Praised be God, my Lord! What he wills is now seen.)

The irony in these words is concentrated in word-play on the verb *sé* (which can refer both to vision and to understanding). At the moment when the grace of God grants him physical vision, Ámundi uses the phrase *sér nú* metaphorically, to refer to what he considers is some newly-received spiritual insight. In Ámundi's opinion, his axe-blow repays the lack of compensation for his father, and thus balances the scales of justice. Ironically, this 'insight' is in fact the uncomprehending product of the spiritual blindness

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<sup>428</sup> Augustine, Tractate 44: *Homilies on the Gospel of John*, p.245-49, at p. 245.

<sup>429</sup> See, for example, Augustine, Tractate 33: 'They who knew not the law believed on Him who had sent the law; and those men who were teaching the law despised Him, that it might be fulfilled which the Lord Himself had said, "I am come that they who see not may see and they that see may be made blind":' *Homilies on the Gospel of John*, p. 197.

that defines justice in terms of the old law of ‘an eye for an eye’: It is appropriate, therefore, that Ámundi, in striking the blow, should plunge himself back into physical darkness.

These ironic words: *Sér nú, hvat hann vill*, are in apparent conformity with the traditional medieval view that carries through to the thirteenth century - that it is only by sublimating one’s own will to that of God that justice can be found:

Justice in man is that rectitude of will in which the will of the rational creature is subject to the will of God.<sup>430</sup>

But the conformity is only apparent. In an ironic reversal of this Christian definition, Ámundi visions God’s will as conforming to his own, pre-Christian concept of justice.

The Scriptural reason for the miracle in Joh. ix is to show the power of God: ‘he was born blind so that God’s power might be displayed in curing him’ (vv. 2-3). However, since the story was treated as a conversion allegory during the Middle Ages, and since conversion is the means through which God’s mercy offers the hope of salvation to fallen man, it is not surprising that ‘mercy’ should have been added to ‘power’ in medieval texts, as one of the attributes of God demonstrated by the miracle. This tradition was known in Norse:

Su er aunnur sauk til bardagens, at guð vill syna sina dyrð aa þeim er hann berr, til þess at menn skili, at hann er allzvaldandi guð, sem hann gerði aa þeim er blindr var borinn, ok sagði drottin sialfr, at hvarki hafði misgert hann ne frændr hans til þess bardaga, er aa honum var, helldr hafði hann meinlæti til þess, at guð syndi aa honum sina dyrð ok miskunn i giof synarinnar.<sup>431</sup>

(That is another reason for scourging, that God wishes to make manifest his glory in those whom he scourges, so that men may understand that he is Almighty God, as he did in him who was born blind. And our Lord himself said that neither he nor his kinsmen had sinned to cause this scourge which was upon him. Rather, he had the illness for this reason, that in him God might reveal *his glory and mercy* in the gift of sight.)

It is Ámundi’s tragedy that his adherence to the old revenge ethic renders him blind to the fact that, in order to be *rétt fyrir guði*, an act of justice must combine power with mercy. His is a tragedy that certainly contains a blasphemy, but the blasphemy is not the author’s, but Ámundi’s own: a Christian only in name, he strikes with his axe as

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<sup>430</sup> Anselm, *Cur Deus homo* I.11 (PL 158, cols. 376-77). See Engelhardt, “De contemptu mundi”, p. 119.

<sup>431</sup> *Páls saga postola II*, chapter 32 (*Post.*, p. 270).

soon as he is given his sight by God. It was St Paul who defined this type of blasphemy (Heb. vi, 4-6):

For when men have once been enlightened, when they have had a taste of the heavenly gift and a share in the Holy Spirit, when they have experienced the goodness of God's word and the spiritual energies of the age to come, and after all this have fallen away, it is impossible to bring them again to repentance; for with their own hands they are crucifying the Son of God and making mock of his death<sup>432</sup>

The story of Ámundi Hqskuldsson forms a contrast with that of Síðu-Hallr's intervention at the Alþingi. Ámundi exacts blood-vengeance for his father, even though money compensation has already been paid, while Síðu-Hallr refuses to claim financial compensation for the death of his son, in order to help prevent the shedding of more blood. Ámundi reveals himself to be a quasi-convert, who disappears from the saga immediately after his personal crisis, back into the darkness out of which he had entered the narrative. Síðu-Hallr, on the other hand, intervenes in the national crisis, and earns 'loud approval' for words that prove him to be indeed a humble *lítilmenni* - a true convert.

### 3.12 Conclusions

This chapter has argued that a principal theme within *Njáls saga* is the fulfilment of the old law, which functioned to dispense simple justice, by a new ethic which added mercy as an essential component of good judgement. The combination of justice and mercy, it was argued, is based on the model of divine judgement, a model of love and reconciliation which offers wrongdoers three opportunities to amend their lives, and only allows unmediated justice to take its course on the fourth offence. The ideal king, Brian Boru of Ireland, has this as the central guiding principle of his administering the law (3.2 above), and the same principle, it was argued, applies in the cases of Hrafn the Red at Clontarf (3.3) and Flosi's defence lawyer, Eyjólfur Bqlverksson (3.9). Hrafn, on his last chance, repents and is spared; Eyjólfur offends for a fourth time and dies.

Another character who, like Hrafn, is three times shown mercy, and comes close to offending for a fourth time, is Ingjaldr of Keldur. It was suggested at 3.10 above that the spear-wound he received in the leg, which proved not to be fatal, was a just punishment for his almost betraying Njáll in a fourth offence. It is noteworthy that

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<sup>432</sup> Impossibile est enim eos qui semel sunt illuminati, gustaverunt etiam donum caeleste, et participes facti sunt Spiritus Sancti, gustaverunt nihilominus bonum Dei verbum, virtutesque saeculi venturi, et prolapsi sunt, rursus renovari ad poenitentiam, rursus crucifigentes sibimetipsis Filium Dei, et ostentui habentes.

the author strongly implies that the spear-wound suffered in both legs by the Lawspeaker, Skapti Þóroddsson, during the battle at the Alþingi which follows the burning of Njáll, is also a just punishment, in this case for the offence of adding insults to his refusal to support Gizurr the White and Ásgrímr Elliða-Grímsson in their prosecution of the burners. Ásgrímr retorts (p. 371):

“Er þat nokkur várkunn, at þú veitir oss eigi lið, en hitt er várkunnarlaust, at þú bregðir oss brigzlum. Munda ek þat vilja, áðr þinginu sé lokit, at þú fingir af þessum málum ina mestu óvirðing ok bætti þér engi þá skomm.”

(‘To refuse us your help may be excused, but it is inexcusable to upbraid us with blame. I would wish that before this assembly is concluded you might suffer the greatest disgrace from these matters, and that nobody should compensate you for your shame.’)

The author later remarks that *Skapta var engu bætr áverkinn* (‘no compensation was awarded Skapti for his wound’: p. 413). Skapti’s is a relatively trivial offence, and his is a wound from which he apparently quickly recovers, since he is able to take part in the settlement negotiations on the day after the battle. Ingjaldr’s offences have been much more serious, and his wound, though finally cured, first develops sepsis, and leaves him with a permanent limp. It was suggested at 3.9 and 3.10 that where there is corruption in the system (Eyjólfur Bqlverksson’s prostitution of the law; Ingjaldr’s offences against Njáll), justice must cut out the sepsis before mercy can act (the interventions of Þórhallr Ásgrímsson and then Síðu-Hallr at the Alþingi; the healing of Ingjaldr), in accordance with Christ’s injunction at Matt. xviii, 8, from the Gospel reading for Michaelmas. If the arguments presented in this chapter are correct, it follows from these cases that under the new law, justice is no longer only retributive, but may now also be purgative, preparatory to reconciliation.